

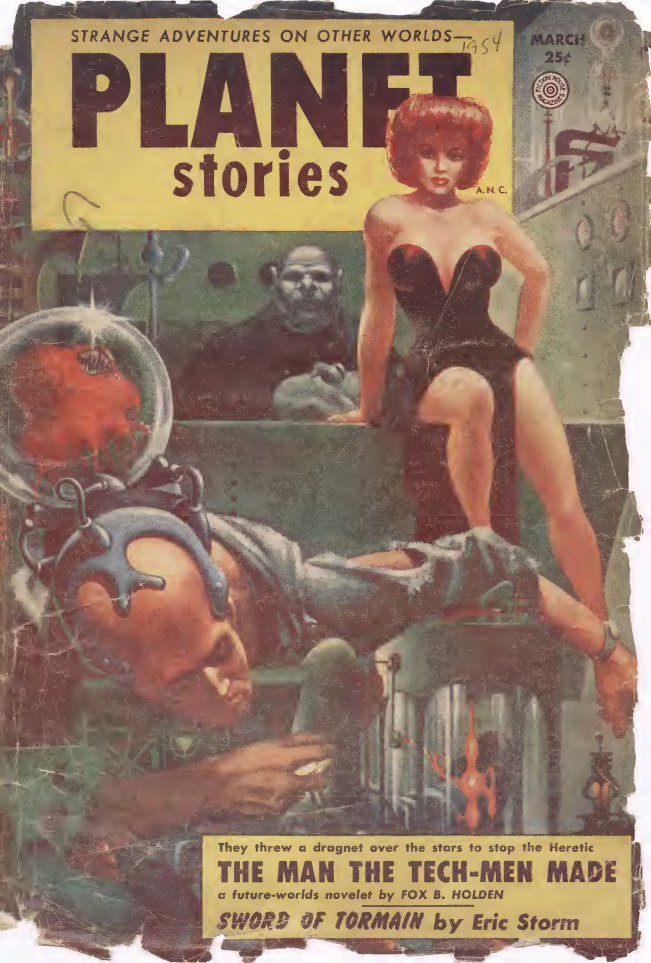
STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—1954

PLANET stories

MARCH
25¢



A.N.C.



They threw a dragnet over the stars to stop the Heretic

THE MAN THE TECH-MEN MADE

a future-worlds novelet by FOX B. HOLDEN

SWORD OF TORMAIN by Eric Storm

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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 5

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1954

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He was a man of a hundred planets, drawn from the blackness of space to save a tech-galaxy from disintegration. He was Kane, the warrior-mechanic . . . memory-king of knowledgeable worlds . . . savior to millions . . . heretic to the ruling few—so they threw a dragnet over the stars to stop him.

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SWORD OF TORMAIN Eric Storm 18

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Let 'er rain.

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Ted Williams doesn't crack a home run every time he steps to the plate, nor does Ben Hogan win each and every golf tournament he enters. Continuous peak performance is rare among athletes as well as among artists, writers, scientists, men and women in many varied fields of endeavor. What's all this leading to, you may be asking. Well, it concerns Bradbury and his **THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN** which appeared in the November issue of **PLANET STORIES** magazine. A preponderant number of readers didn't like it. Some termed it "stinko." Others called it a "poor excuse for a story," particularly since it ran under the name of Ray Bradbury. Apparently these folks expect a **MARS IS HEAVEN** every time Bradbury sits himself down at the typewriter. Granted "APPLES" was slim on plot and characterization, nevertheless it made very pleasurable reading; an entertaining combination mood-action piece.

At any rate, we followed this one up with another Bradbury epic in the January issue. **A SOUND OF THUNDER** is a first-rate time-travel story, combining excellent action, characters, plot and an ending with a wallop. We are looking forward to reader reaction on this one, feeling fairly certain that Mr. Bradbury will be the recipient of sufficient bouquets to bury the brickbats piled up from his "APPLES."

Carol McKinney, the lass from Provo, Utah, raises an intriguing issue in her letter in these columns. The "Marriage of the Future" is her topic, and she asks: "Will it continue as in centuries past, with a couple raising their own children, constituting the time-honored family? Or shall it dissolve utterly, so that matings between couples are only temporary at best and all the children are raised by the government or some other organization? Or, for a third intriguing possibility, one that has been discussed in several stories recently, what about Group Marriages wherein several men and women band together and all children are raised jointly?"

"This situation seems to fire the imagination far more than the instance of temporary mating, with the children raised by an outside organization. However, I believe that marriage will go right on the way it has for the past several thousand years, one man and one woman raising their own children. And what do you think?"

Pic-winners for the best letters hit the wire in this order: 1) J. Dean Clark; 2) Paul Mittelbuscher; 3) Don Wégars.

WELCOME

3, Arkle Street,
Gateshead 8,
Co. Durham,
England

Dear Editor,

Being an American zine you may not want to have a letter from a British sci-fiction fan in your pages. However seeing that there's only one zine over here that prints their readers' letters, I thought

that it's about time I went into the center of sci-fiction. I've only been reading stf for six years so I'm just a junior. AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION is the only current monthly zine we have over here, also six others which only come out when they feel like it.

Plenty of novels are published and a good few back-issued reprints of Stateside zines. PLANET was also reprinted over here, but that was a long long time ago. Why don't you bring it back out over here?

One story that sticks in my mind that was published in PLANET is FLAME JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS. That was one of my "teething ring" stories, and that was the last I saw of your zine until last month, when a Stateside friend sent me a copy.

I can't say that you've improved much in stories as I don't quite remember every ish of the old reprints. One thing, the cover is not as good as it used to be. The covers are what I can always remember on your zines.

I see that a good few fans are commenting on Bryan Berry. There's an author for you. I call him Britain's Ray Bradbury. He's written a lot of full length novels, all of them good. You should try and get hold of his ANCIENT CITY it's only a short but it's darn good. One thing I noticed straight away about PLANET is there are no "This is the tops of stf," or "This zine is the No. 1 of all others" such as certain other zines cry out. Maybe they are good but, heck why don't they simmer down from shouting it all over the galaxy.

Like I said before, why don't you bring PLANET back over here? One zine that's stuck to the road since God knows when is ASTOUNDING. Most of the short stories are not published; same goes for articles, editorial and letters. Just the main novel and one or two shorts get into the reprints. STARTLING, GALAXY, SPACE, THRILLING WONDER, AMAZING, FANTASTIC and SUPER SCIENCE—those are all reprinted over here in shortened form and from 3 months to two years old. So why not PLANET, huh? Well enough of this for the time being. Till I write again,

Galactically yours,

Don Allen

Ed's Note: PLANET, I have learned, will be making its reappearance on British newsstands within the next few months.

SPOUSE OF SPACE!

385 No. 8th East St.
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack:

Shades of Buck Rogers!—the Nov. PLANET'S cover was broadcasting strongly on its own special frequency. Went into a drugstore, stopped to look at the mags, and there down on the shelf next to the floor—the special one reserved for THRILLING LOVE, 2-GUN WESTERN ROMANCES, PLANET STORIES and other trashy pulps—I saw this Cover.

It so happened the top third of the mags were hidden by the next shelf above so there weren't any helpful identifying titles showing. But I knew it. The Cover didn't need the big red and yellow box at the top proclaiming it to be PLANET STORIES—one glance at the Fem and menacing Thing was all that was necessary. Yup.

Ignoring the horrified gasps around me, I seized the lurid thing firmly, plunked down the necessary medium of exchange, and walked ecstatically out

leafing through the enthralling pages. Defend stf to the unbelievers?? Why??

No amount of explanation or description will straighten out the strange quirk in their gray matter that prevents them from enjoying the world's most interesting and exciting literature. Does it really need defending after all? Only if, somehow, YOU feel silly for reading it and you try to justify yourself in the eyes of others. Stf stands strictly on its own merits and none are so bigoted as they who condemn without sampling.

What was so sensational about Bradbury's short, THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN? Aside from a certain beauty in description and style of writing it was strictly a third-rate yarn. (But anything with Bradbury tacked onto it automatically gets printed.)

The best story this time was THE PRISON OF THE STARS, with BEYOND THE X ECLIPIC following for a close second. The others were more or less mediocre, darn it.

You know, it actually doesn't make a particle of difference whether or not Planet goes pocket sized. All its steady readers are going to go right on with it, although it might possibly pick up a few new ones. Suit yourself, and the publishers. Oh, by all means, let's have trimmed edges! No one ever accused them of spoiling a mag's looks and in many cases it has immensely improved the old gal's appearance.

Perhaps everyone would prefer having the cover in one separate section with the title and featured stories neatly boxed. No argument there at all. Covers? Who cares actually? Again, you can suit yourself. After all this time the curious observing eyes who watch me buy that magazine have even become indifferent, so it doesn't matter about the lurid covers. Maybe if you can get an extra-shocking one those glazed Eyes would even give out with one more small spark. It would be an interesting experiment anyway!

And about ye ed—let's continue to permit him to go on in his own little way. So far he's done a pretty good job.

So you see, Jack, all those things you mentioned as possible fuel for the fire didn't even spark a flicker of flame. Everyone's too satisfied with PLANET and the job you've done with it. However—if you'd like a controversial subject to kick around for awhile—

One that's never been discussed in any mag's feud columns is the MARRIAGE OF THE FUTURE. Will it continue as in the centuries past, with a couple raising their own children constituting the time-honored Family? Or will it dissolve utterly so that matings between couples are only temporary at best and all the children are raised by the government or some other organization? Or, for a third intriguing possibility, one that has been discussed aptly in several stories the past couple of years, what about Group Marriages, wherein several men and women band together and all children are raised jointly? This situation seems to fire the imagination far more than the instance of temporary mating, with the children raised by an outside organization. However, I believe that marriage will go right on the way it has for the past several thousand years, one man and one woman raising their own kids. And what do you think???

Best letters this time:

1. A. K. King 2. Robert Gilbert 3. Joe Keogh
You wondered whether or not to increase LA VIZI? Well, really now—just how did you expect us to react to THAT? Naturally, everyone who

(Continued on page 108)



GRANDMA PERKINS AND THE SPACE PIRATES

By JAMES McCONNELL

Raven-haired, seductive Darling Toujours' smoke-and-flame eyes kindled sparks in hearts all over the universe. But it took sweet old Grandma Perkins, of the pirate ship Dirty Shame, to set the Jupiter moons on fire.

"I CAN always get along with a man if he remembers who he is," said Darling Toujours, the raven-haired, creamy-skinned televideo actress whose smoke-and-flame eyes lit fires in hearts all

over the solar system. She was credited with being the most beautiful woman alive and there were few who dared to contradict her when she mentioned it.

"And I can always get along with a



woman if she remembers who I am," replied Carlton E. Carlton, the acid-tongued author whose biting novels had won him universal fame. He leaned his thin, bony body back into the comfort of an overstuffed chair and favored the actress with a wicked smile.

The two of them were sitting in the finest lounge of the luxury space ship *Kismet*, enjoying postprandial cocktails with Captain Homer Fogarty, the *Kismet's* rotund commanding officer. The *Kismet* was blasting through space at close to the speed of light, bound from Callisto, one of Jupiter's moons, back to Earth. But none of the two hundred Earthbound passengers were conscious of the speed at all.

Darling Toujours waved a long cigarette holder at the author. "Don't pay any attention to him, Captain. You know how writers are—always putting words in other people's mouths, and not very good ones at that."

"Do you mean not very good words or not very good mouths, my dear?" Carlton asked. The solar system's most famous actress clamped her scarlet lips shut with rage. It would take someone like Carlton E. Carlton, she knew, to point out the one minor blemish in an otherwise perfect body—her slightly over-sized mouth.

She began to wish that she had never left Callisto, that she had cancelled her passage on the *Kismet* when she learned that Carlton was to be a fellow passenger. But her studio had wired her to return to Earth immediately to make a new series of three dimensional video films. And the *Kismet* was the only first class space ship flying to Earth for two weeks. So she had kept her ticket in spite of Carlton.

"I must say that I think Miss Toujours has the prettiest mouth I've ever seen," boomed Captain Fogarty, his voice sounding something like a cross between a foghorn and a steam whistle. And he was not merely being gallant, for many a lonely night as he flew the darkness between Earth and the many planets, he had dreamed of caressing those lips.

"And I think you are definitely a man of discriminating taste," said Darling demurely, crossing her legs and arranging her dress to expose a little more of the Toujours charms to the Captain's eye.

Carlton smiled casually at the exposed

flesh. "It's all very pretty, my dear," he said smugly. "But we've seen it all before and in space you're supposed to act like a lady, if you can act that well."

Darling Toujours drew back her hand to smack Carlton one in a very unlady-like manner when she suddenly realized that they were not alone. Her hand froze, poised elegantly in mid-air, as she turned to see a newcomer standing at the door.

THE witness to the impending slap was a withered little lady, scarcely five feet tall, with silvered hair, eyes that twinkled like a March wind, and a friendly rash of wrinkles that gave her face the kindly, weathered appearance of an old stone idol. Her slight figure was lost in volumes of black cloth draped on her in a manner that had gone out of style at least fifty years before. The little woman coughed politely.

"I beg your pardon," she told them in a sweet, high little voice. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything. If you would like to hit the gentleman, Miss Toujours, I'll be glad to come back later."

Darling Toujours opened her violet eyes wide in surprise. "Why, I was . . . I was . . . I—" The actress uttered a small, gulping sound as she recovered her poise. "Why, I was just going to pat him on the cheek for being such a nice boy. You are a nice boy, aren't you, Carlton?" She leaned forward to stroke him gently on the face. Carlton roared with laughter and the good Captain colored deeply.

"Oh," said the little old woman, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that he was your son." Carlton choked suddenly and Darling suffered from a brief fit of hysteria.

The Captain took command. "Now, look here, Madam," he sputtered. "What is it you want?"

"I really wanted to see you, Captain," she told him, her battered old shoes bringing her fully into the room with little mincing steps. "The Purser says I have to sign a contract of some kind with you, and I wanted to know how to write my name. I'm Mrs. Omar K. Perkins, but you see, I'm really Mrs. Matilda Perkins because my Omar died a few years ago. But I haven't signed my name very much since then and I'm not at all sure of which is legal." She put one

bird-like little hand to her throat and clasped the cameo there almost as if it could give her support. She looked so small and so frail that Fogarty forgave her the intrusion.

"It really doesn't make much difference how you sign the thing, just so long as you sign it," he blustered. "Just a mere formality anyway. You just sign it any way you like." He paused, hoping that she would leave now that she had her information.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," she said, but made no move whatsoever to leave. Captain Fogarty gave her his hardened stare of the type which withered most people where they stood. Mrs. Perkins just smiled sweetly at him.

His rage getting out of hand, he finally blurted, "And now, Mrs. Perkins, I think you'd better be getting back to your quarters. As you know, this is a private lounge for the first class passengers."

Mrs. Perkins continued to smile at him. "Yes, I know. It's lovely, isn't it? I'll just go out this way." And before anyone could stop her, she had moved to the door to Darling *Toujours'* suite and had opened it, stepping inside.

"That's my room, not the door out," Darling said loudly.

"So I see," said Mrs. Perkins, staring at the opulent furnishings with avid pleasure. "It's such a pretty thing, all done up with mother-of-pearl like that, isn't it? And what a pretty lace nightie lying on the bed." Mrs. Perkins picked up the sheer, gossamer garment to examine it. "You do wear something under it, don't you?"

Darling screeched and darted for the door. She snatched the nightie away from Mrs. Perkins and rudely propelled the older woman out the door, closing it behind her. "Captain, this woman must GO!"

"I was just leaving, Miss *Toujours*. I hope you and your son have a very happy voyage. Good day, Captain Fogarty," she called over her shoulder as she exited. Carlton E. Carlton's shrill laughter followed her down the companionway.

MRS. PERKINS had been lying in her berth reading for less than an hour when the knock sounded at her door. She would have preferred to sit up and read, but her cabin was so small that there was no

room for any other furniture besides the bed.

"Come in," she called in a small voice.

Johnny Weaver, steward for the cheaper cabins, poked his youthful, freckled face through the door. "Howdy, Mrs. Perkins. I wondered if I could do anything for you? It's about ten minutes before we eat."

"Well, you can pull that big box down from the top shelf there, if you don't mind. And, I wonder, would you mind calling me Grandma? All my children do it and I miss it so." She gave him a wrinkled smile that was at once wistful and petulant.

Johnny laughed in an easy, infectious manner. "Sure thing, Grandma." He stretched his long arms up to bring down the heavy bag and found himself wondering just how it had gotten up there in the first place. He didn't remember ever putting it there for her and Grandma Perkins was obviously too frail a woman to have handled such a heavy box by herself. He put it on the floor.

As she stooped over and extracted a pair of low-heeled, black and battered shoes from the box, she asked him, "Johnny, what was that paper I signed this afternoon?"

"Oh, that? Why that was just a contract for passage, Grandma. You guaranteed to pay them so much for the flight, which you've already done, and they guaranteed that you wouldn't be put off against your will until you reached your destination."

"But why do we have to have a contract?"

Johnny leaned back, relaxing against the door. "Well, STAR—that's Stellar Transportation and Atomic Research, you know—is one of the thirteen monopolies in this part of the solar system. The "Big Thirteen," we call them. STAR charts every space flight in this neck of the woods. Well, back in the old days, when space flights were scarce, it used to be that you'd pay for a ticket from Saturn to Earth, say, and you'd get to Mars and they'd stop for fuel. Maybe somebody on Mars would offer a lot of money for your cabin. So STAR would just bump you off, refund part of your money and leave you stranded there. In order to get the monopoly, they had to promise to stop all that. And the Solar Congress makes them sign contracts guaranteeing you that they won't put you off against your wishes. Of course, they don't dare do it anymore

anyway, but that's the law."

Grandma Perkins sighed. "It's such a small cabin I don't think anybody else would want it. But it's all that I could afford," she said, smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress with both hands.

"Anything else I can do for you, Grandma?"

"No, thank you, Johnny. I think I can make it up the steps to the dining room by myself."

A little while later when Johnny looked into her room to see if she had gone, the cabin was empty and the heavy box was back in place in the top cabinet.

The food that evening was not the very best, Grandma Perkins thought to herself, but that was mostly due to her seat. By the time the waiter got around to her little cranny most of it was cold. But she didn't complain. She enjoyed watching the people with the more expensive cabins parade their clothes and their manners at the Captain's table. And, it must be admitted, she was more than a trifle envious of them. Her acquaintances of the afternoon, Miss Toujours and Mr. Carlton, were seated there, Miss Toujours having the place of honor to the Captain's right.

Grandma watched them as they finished up their food and then she moved from her little table over to one of the very comfortable sofas in the main lounge. In reality she wasn't supposed to be sitting there, but she hoped that she could get away with it. The divans were so much more comfortable than her hard, narrow bed that she felt like sitting there for a long time, by herself, just thinking.

But her hopes met with disappointment. For shortly after she sat down, Darling Toujours and Carlton E. Carlton strolled over and sat down across from her, not recognizing her at first. Then Carlton spied her.

"Darling! There's that priceless little woman we met this afternoon."

"The little hag, you mean," Miss Toujours muttered under her breath, but loudly enough for Grandma Perkins to hear.

"Why, hello, Miss Toujours. And Mr. Carlton too. I hope you'll forgive me for this afternoon. I've found out who you were, you see."

"Of course we forgive you, Mrs. Jerkins," Darling said throatily, baring her teeth like a feline.

"My name is Perkins," Grandma smiled.

"I hope you don't mind, Toujours, but you know, you remind me a great deal of my grandniece, Agatha. She was undoubtedly the most lovely child I've ever seen."

Why, thank you, Mrs. Perkins," Darling purred, starting to preen just a bit. Anything could be forgiven someone who complimented her.

"Of course, Agatha never was quite bright," Grandma said as she turned her head aside as if in sorrow. "They were all set to put her in an institution when she ran off and married the lizard man in a carnival. I believe she's still appearing in the show as the bearded lady. A pity. She was so pretty, just like you."

Darling Toujours muttered a few choice words under her breath.

"But we must all make the best of things as they come. That's what Omar, my husband, used to say." Grandma paused to wipe away a small tear that had gotten lodged in one of her eyes. "That reminds me," she said finally, "I've got a three dimensional picture of Omar right here. And pictures of all my children, my ten lovely children. I brought them with me specially tonight because I thought you might want to look at them. Now, where did I put them?" Grandma opened her purse and began rummaging around in its voluminous confines.

Darling and Carlton exchanged horrified glances and then rose silently and tip toed out of the lounge.

Grandma looked up from her search. "Oh, my, they seem to have gone."

Johnny Weaver, who had been clearing one of the nearby tables, put down a stack of dirty dishes and came over to her. "I'd like to see the pictures, Grandma."

"Oh, that's very nice of you, Johnny, but—" she said quickly.

"Really I would, Grandma. Where are they?"

"I—" She stopped and the devilment showed in her eyes. Her withered little face pursed itself into a smile. "There aren't any pictures, Johnny. I don't carry any. I know their faces all so well I don't have

to. But any time I want to get rid of somebody I just offer to show them pictures of my family. You'd be surprised how effective it is."

Johnny laughed. "Why are you going to Earth, anyway, Grandma?"

The old woman sighed. "It's a long story, Johnny, but you just sit down and I'll tell it to you."

"I can't sit down in the lounge, but I'll be glad to stand up and listen."

"Then I'll make it a short story. You see, Johnny, I'm an old woman. I'll be 152 this year. And ever since Omar, my husband, died a few years ago, I've lived from pillar to post. First with one child and then with another. They've all been married for decades now of course, with children and grandchildren of their own. And I guess that I just get in their way. There just isn't much left in life for a feeble old woman like me." She sniffled a moment or two as if to cry. Johnny, remembering the heavy box in her cabin that got moved up and down without his help, suppressed a smile on the word "feeble."

"There aren't many friends my age left around any more. So I'm being sent to Earth to a home full of dear, sweet old ladies my age, the money for which is being provided by my dear, sweet children—all ten of them." Grandma dabbed a bit of a handkerchief at her eyes. "The rats," she muttered under her breath. When she saw her companion was smiling she dropped her pretense of crying.

"To be truthful, Johnny, they've grown old and stodgy, all of them. And I'm sure they think I've lost most of my marbles. Everything I did embarrassed them, so I guess it's for the best, but—"

Grandma Perkins never finished the sentence, for interrupting her came the horrendous clang of the *Kismet's* general alarm, and on its heels, charging through the main salon like a rhinoceros in heat, came Captain Fogarty.

"PIRATES! PIRATES! We're being attacked by space pirates! You there!" he shouted at Johnny. "Man your station! And you, Madam, to your quarters at once! PIRATES!" he shouted again and barged through the door again and bellowed down the hall to the main bridge.

Johnny was off like a startled rabbit, but Grandma moved with serene calmness to the door. Maybe, she thought, we're going to have a little excitement after all.

At the door to the steps leading to her downstairs cabin she paused to think.

"If I go down and hide, I'll miss all the fun. Of course, it's safer, and an old woman like me shouldn't be up and about when pirates are around, but—" A delicious smile spread over her face as she took her scruples firmly in hand and turned to follow the bellowing Captain towards the bridge.

II

THE STARSHIP *Kismet* was the pride and joy of Stellar Transportation and Atomic Research. It was outfitted with every known safety device and the control room was masterfully planned for maximum efficiency. But the astral architect who designed her never anticipated the situation facing her at the present. The *Kismet's* bridge was a welter of confusion.

The Senior Watch Officer was shouting at his assistant, the Navigator was cursing out the Pilot and the Gunnery Officer, whose job had been a sinecure until now, was bellowing at them all. Above the hubbub, suddenly, came the raucous voice of Captain Fogarty as he stalked onto the bridge.

"What in great space has happened to the motors? Why are we losing speed?"

The Senior Watch Officer saluted and shouted, "Engine Room reports the engines have all stopped, Sir. Don't know why. We're operating the lights and vents on emergency power."

The Communications Officer spoke up. "The pirate ship reports that they're responsible, Sir. They say they've got a new device that will leave us without atomic power for as long as they like."

As if to confirm this, over the loudspeaker came a voice. "Ahoy, STAR *Kismet*. Stand by for boarders. If you don't open up to us, we'll blast you off the map."

"Pirates! Attacking us! Incredible!" cried the Captain. "There are no pirates any more. What have we got a Space Patrol for? Where in blazes is the Space Patrol anyway?"

The Communications Officer gulped. "Er, ah, we got in contact with Commodore Trumble. He says his ship can get here in ten hours anyway, and for us to wait for him."

Captain Fogarty snorted. "Fat lot of good he'll do us. Wait for him, eh? Well, we'll just blow that pirate out of the sky right now. Stand by the guns!"

"The guns are useless," whined the Gunnery Officer. "The atomics that run them won't operate at all. What will we do?"

"Ahoy, *STAR Kismet*. Open up your hatches when we arrive and let us in, or we won't spare a man of you," boomed the loudspeaker.

"Pirates going to board us. How nice," muttered Grandma to herself as she eavesdropped just outside the door to the bridge.

"They'll never get through the hatches alive. At least our small arms still work. We'll kill 'em all!" cried Captain Fogarty.

"We only want one of you. All the rest of you will be spared if you open up the hatches and don't try to make no trouble," came the voice over the radio.

"Tell them I'd rather all of us be killed than to let one dirty pirate on board my ship," the Captain shouted to the Communications Officer.

"Oh, my goodness. That doesn't sound very smart," Grandma said half aloud. And turning from the doorway, she crept back through the deserted passageway.

The main passenger hatch was not too far from the bridge. Grandma found it with ease, and in less than three minutes she had zipped herself into one of the emergency-use space suits stowed away beside the port. She felt awfully awkward climbing into the monstrous steel and plastic contraption, and her small body didn't quite fit the proportions of the metallic covering. But once she had maneuvered herself into it, she felt quite at ease.

Opening the inner door to the airlock, she clanked into the little room. As the door shut behind her, she pressed the cycling button and evacuated the air from the lock.

A minute or so later she heard poundings outside the airlock and quite calmly she reached out a mailed fist and turned a switch plainly marked:

EMERGENCY LOCK

DO NOT OPERATE IN FLIGHT

The outer hatch opened almost immediately. The radio in Grandma's suit crackled with static. "What are you doing here?" demanded a voice over the suit radio.

"Pirates! I'm hiding from the pirates. They'll never find me here!" she told them in a voice she hoped sounded full of panic.

"What's your name?" asked the voice.

"Darling *Toujours*, famous television actress," she lied quite calmly.

"That's the one, boys," said another voice. "Let's go." Catching hold of Grandma's arm, they led her out into the emptiness of free space.

HALF an hour later, after the pirate ship had blasted far enough away from the *Kismet*, the men in the control room relaxed and began to take off their space suits. One of the men who Grandma soon learned was Lamps O'Toole, the nominal leader of the pirates, stretched his brawny body to ease the crinks out of it and then rubbed his hands together. Grandma noticed that he carried a week's beard on his face, as did most of the other men.

"Well, that was a good one, eh, Snake?" said Lamps.

Snake Simpson was a wiry little man whose tough exterior in no way suggested a reptile, except, perhaps, for his eyes which sat too close to one another. "You bet, Skipper. We're full fledged pirates now, just like old Captain Blackbrood."

"You mean Blackbeard, Snake," said Lamps.

"Sure. He used to sit around broodin' up trouble all the time."

One of the other men piped up. "And to think we get the pleasurable company of the sweetest doll in the whole solar system for free besides the money."

"Aw, women are no dern good—all of them," said Snake.

"Now, Snake, that's no way to talk in front of company. You just apologize to the lady," Lamps told him. Lamps was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than Snake. Snake apologized.

"That's better. And now, Miss *Toujours*,

maybe you'd be more comfortable without that space suit on," he said.

"Oh, no, thank you. I feel much better with it on," a small voice said over the suit's loudspeaker system.

Lamps grinned. "Oh, come now, Miss Toujours. We ain't going to hurt you. I guarantee nobody will lay a finger to you."

"But I feel much—much safer, if you know what I mean," said the voice.

"Heck. With one of them things on, you can't eat, can't sleep, can't— Well, there's lots of things you can't do with one of them things on. Besides, we all want to take a little look at you, if you don't mind. Snake, you and Willie help the little lady out of her attire."

As the men approached her, Grandma sensed the game was up. "Okay," she told them. "I give up. I can make it by myself." She started to take the bulky covering off. She had gotten no more than the headpiece off when the truth dawned on her companions.

"Holy Smoke (or something like that)," said one of the men.

"Nippin' Nebulae," said another.

"It ain't Darling Toujours at all!" cried Lamps.

"It ain't even no woman!" cried Snake.

"I beg your pardon," said Grandma, and quite nonchalantly shed the rest of the suit and sat down in a comfortable chair. "I am Mrs. Matilda Perkins."

When he could recover his powers of speech, Lamps sputtered, "I think you owe us a sort of an explanation, lady. If you know what I mean."

"Certainly. I know exactly what you mean. It's all quite simple. When I overheard that you intended to board the *Kismet*, searching for only one person, I decided that one person had to be Darling Toujours. I guessed right off that she was the only one on board worth kidnapping and holding for ransom, so I simply let you believe that I was she and you took me. That's easy to understand, isn't it?"

"Lady, I don't know what your game is, but it better be good. Now, just why did you do this to us?" Lamps was restraining himself nobly.

"You never would have gotten inside the *Kismet* without my assistance. And even if

you had, you'd never have gotten back out alive.

"Captain Fogarty's men would have cut you to ribbons. So I opened the hatch to let you in, planted myself in the way, and you got out with me before they could muster their defenses. So, you see, I saved your lives."

Grandma Perkins paused in her narrative and looked up at her audience, giving them a withered little smile. "And if you want to know why, well. . . .I was bored on the *Kismet*, and I thought how nice it would be to run away and join a gang of cutthroat pirates."

"She's batty," moaned Snake.

"She's lost her marbles," muttered another.

"Let's toss her overboard right now," said still another.

Lamps O'Toole took the floor. "Now, wait a minute. We can't do that," he said loudly. "We got enough trouble as is. You know what would happen to us if the Space Patrol added murder to the list. They'd put the whole fleet in after us and track us and our families down to the last kid." Then he turned to the little old lady to explain.

"Look, lady—"

"My name is Mrs. Matilda Perkins. You may call me Grandma."

"Okay, Grandma, look. You really fixed us good. To begin with, we ain't really pirates. We used to operate this tub as a freighter between the Jupiter moons. But STAR got a monopoly on all space flights, including freight, and they just froze us out. We can't operate nowhere in the solar system, unless we get their permission. And they just ain't giving permission to nobody these days." Lamps flopped into one of the control seats and lit a cigarette.

"So, when us good, honest men couldn't find any work because of STAR, and we didn't want to give up working in space, we just ups and decides to become pirates. This was our first job, and we sure did need the money we could have gotten out of Darling Toujours' studios for ransom."

Lamps sighed. "Now, we got you instead, no chance of getting the ransom money, and to top it all off, we'll be wanted for piracy by the Space Patrol."

"Well, it doesn't seem to me that you're

ever going to be good pirates at this rate," Grandma told him. "You should have known better than to take a woman at her word."

"I don't suppose you got any rich relatives what would pay to get you back?" suggested Snake hopefully.

"I haven't got any rich relatives period," she said pertly. Then she added, "But my ten children might scrape up a little cash for you if you promised you wouldn't bring me back at all."

"I figured as much," Lamps said dolefully. "Lookit, Grandma, the best thing we can do is to put you off safely at the next place we stop. Unless we get you back in one piece the Space Patrol will be on our necks forever. So don't go getting any ideas about joining up with us."

"Well, the very least you could do for a poor old lady is to feed her," Grandma told him, her lower lip sticking out in a most petulant manner. "They like to have starved me to death on that *Kismet*."

"We ain't got much fancy in the line of grub . . ." Lamps began.

"Just show me the way to the kitchen," said Grandma.

III

A FULL meal and three extra helpings of hot biscuits later, Grandma, Lamps and Snake were sitting around in the captain's cabin talking.

". . . and that's the way it is, Grandma. When STAR froze us out of work, we just took our ship here and became pirates." Lamps stuffed one more of Grandma's biscuits into his mouth.

"But where'd you get that fancy gadget that stopped the *Kismet*'s engines from running?" Grandma asked, passing the plate to Snake.

SNAKE took a biscuit and passed the plate back. "That's our Suggestor Ray. Perfessor Spindle, he invented it. He invents a lot of things. He's got a laboratory at our hide-out."

"You mean laboratory, Snake. But who's Professor Spindle?" Grandma asked.

SNAKE wolfed the biscuit down in one mighty gulp. "He used to work for STAR until they stole a couple of his inventions

and wouldn't pay him for them. So he come to work for us. He fixed up the suggestor ray in no time."

"You mean suppressor ray," muttered Lamps, his mouth full.

"That's right. We get close to another space ship and turn it on and it suggests that the engines don't work. Perfessor Spindle, he shedded our engines so they'd work even with it on."

"You mean shielded," said Grandma.

"That's right. He put a big shed over the engines to shed out the suggestor rays." As Snake leaned over to pick up the remaining biscuit from the plate in front of him, a locket slipped out of the neck of his shirt. Grandma saw the picture of a pretty blonde girl in it, and attached to the chain was a wedding ring. Snake noticed her looking at it. "That's my wife. We was married when we was awful young. But she up and flew the coop on me about a year after we was married. Awful pretty, she was."

"She reminds me of someone," said Grandma.

Lamps leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk. "You know, Grandma, you sure do bake fine biscuits. Maybe we'll stop in and see you sometimes at that old folks home and you can fix us some more. Yes, sir, you sure can cook."

Grandma Perkins saw her opening and seized upon it. "You sure could use a woman's touch on this ship. Why, this is the dirtiest ship I've ever seen, and—"

"Aw, now, Grandma. You know we never could have a female on a pirate ship. And we got to get you back to safety before the Space Patrol has us in the coop for good. And what would your ten children say—"

Lamps was saved from further explanation when the door to the cabin burst open and Willie Wicket, the youngest of the pirates, dashed in.

"Captain Lamps! There's a Space Patrol ship bearing down on our tail hell bent for leather!"

Lamps jumped to his feet, as did Snake. "Well, turn on the suppressor ray. That ought to fix it!"

"I turned on the ray and they're still

a-coming!" wailed Willie.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Professor Spindle told us this would happen, and we didn't believe him. That must be one of the new patrol ships," Lamps moaned as he, Snake and Grandma rushed for the control room. En route Grandma was told that the newest patrol ships had a special kind of shielding that made them invulnerable to the Spindle suppressor ray.

Lamps, Snake, Willie and the rest of the crew took turns at trying to out-maneuver the patrol craft, but it had far too much speed for the slower craft, and it became obvious within a few minutes that the pirate ship was doomed to be captured.

Then Grandma spoke up. "Where's that suppressor ray of yours, Lamps?"

"Over there in the corner of the control panel by the televideo set, but don't monkey with it," he told her in the middle of a stream of curses at his ancient vessel. He slammed his hands around the control board frantically trying to elude the oncoming patrol craft. Grandma ignored his warning and quickly pried off the top of the box containing the suppressor mechanism.

A brilliant burst of atomic energy lit the control room. "They're firing at us!" cried Lamps. "Man the guns, men!"

THE crew was so busy executing this order that none of them saw exactly what Grandma was doing until Willie, who was manning the radar screen, suddenly shouted, "Captain Lamps! The patrol ship's stopped!"

"Of course it's stopped," Grandma said indignantly. "I just fixed your old dingus here so it'd work right. And it's going to stay fixed until I can get you out of trouble." She crossed her arms and stared adamantly at Lamps who was so shocked he could scarcely move.

Then she pointed her finger. "Willie, you come over here and turn this televideo on and get me in touch with that patrol ship right away. We've got some things to settle." Willie looked at Lamps for permission, but the captain of the pirate craft was still too stunned to do more than nod his head. Willie walked to the set and began to fiddle with the dials.

Snake broke the silence and asked the question they all wanted to ask. "Grandma,

how come you could fix that Suggestory Ray?"

"Young man," she snapped, "I had ten children, like I told you. One of them, Franklin, my next to oldest boy, was a physicist. And you don't help put a boy through college physics without learning something about how to fiddle with electronics." Lamps felt faint.

The screen of the televideo lit up. "Hello, Patrol Ship! Hello, Patrol Ship!" Willie called over the microphone.

The chubby face of a middle aged man appeared on the screen. His cap carried enough gold braid to stock a small-sized mint. "Hello, Pirate," he cried. "This is Commodore Trumble of the Space Patrol on board the cruiser *Fauntless*. What in blue blazes have you done to my ship!"

"Give me that microphone, Willie," Grandma said, taking the device away from him. She moved over to the screen. "Hello, Commodore. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate ship—" She stopped and turned to Lamps. "What is the name of this tub?" she asked.

"It's—it's the *Lulu Belle*," he said, turning his head aside as if in shame.

"That's hardly a fit name for a pirate ship," Grandma told him, turning back to the televideo. "That's a sissy name."

"That's her name, and that's what it's going to—"

Grandma ignored him. "Hello, Commodore. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate ship *Dirty Shame*."

Lamps groaned audibly.

"Are you the one they kidnapped from the *Kismet*?"

"That's right, Commodore. And now I'm ready to go back."

"What are you doing at the microphone? Who's in command of the *Dirty Shame*?" The Commodore looked near apoplexy.

"I am, for the moment," Grandma told him. Lamps groaned again, this time louder. "And I want you to do me a favor. Please get Captain Fogarty on your long-distance video right away. I want to talk to him."

The Commodore screamed, "I'll do nothing of the kind! What have you done to the *Fauntless*? What are those pirates doing?"

Grandma smiled at him. "Well, right now they're getting ready to blow a hole

right in the side of your ship. And I don't know that I can stop them if you don't do what I say."

"What!" shouted the Commodore.

"And I don't believe your guns are working too well with your atomics out of order, so I'd suggest that you get Captain Fogarty on the video right away."

The Commodore ranted, he bellowed and he raved, but in less than a minute, Captain Fogarty's face appeared on the screen, relayed from the more powerful communications center on the *Faultless*.

"Good evening, Captain Fogarty. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate craft *Dirty Shame*."

Fogarty harrumped. "Oh, it's you. Well, I'm glad to see that you're safe. Did the Commodore rescue you?"

"Well, you could put it that way, I guess. Where is the *Kismet* now?" she asked.

"Heading for Earth as scheduled, if it's any of your business. Why?"

Grandma gave him a twinkling grin. "Well, I don't think you'd better land without me. So you just hold your horses till I get back aboard."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. I can't help it if one of the poorer paying passengers gets herself kidnapped. The Space Patrol has plenty of room. They can just bring you in. I've got a schedule to meet."

Grandma pretended to yawn. "I wouldn't advise your landing on Earth without me. Or landing anywhere, for that matter. You know, Stellar Transportation signed a contract with me guaranteeing that I wouldn't be put off the ship against my will and promising to deliver me to Earth this trip. If I'm not aboard when you land, that contract is broken and so is STAR'S monopoly. So you go right ahead without me. I figure I could make about a million dollars off the law suit myself if you do."

CAPTAIN FOGARTY exploded. "I . . . I . . ." he stammered, then turned away from the screen. Grandma could hear a hasty conversation between him and the *Kismet's* legal officer. In a moment he returned to the screen, a broad but very forced grin on his face. "Why, Mrs. Perkins, we wouldn't think of landing without you. Please tell Commodore Trumble that we'll

be waiting for you."

"But I just might not feel like coming, Captain," Grandma said demurely.

"Tell Commodore Trumble I said he had to bring you back immediately!" blustered Fogarty. "And I hope he wrings those pirates' necks!"

Grandma put on her most pained expression. But to Lamps, Snake and the rest of the men still standing in awe, it was obvious that she was enjoying every minute of it.

"I don't think Commodore Trumble has much to say about it. You see, the pirates captured him and the entire crew of the *Faultless* just before he called you. So the pirates would be the ones who'd have to bring me back. And I'm sure they wouldn't do that unless they were sure I'd be well taken care of."

"I don't believe it!" cried Fogarty. "Trumble, say it isn't so!"

There came a slight sputtering on the circuit. "Well, Fogarty, I . . . well . . . that is, I—"

"Oh, no," moaned Fogarty.

Grandma smiled prettily. "Now, then, about my accommodations. You know that lovely mother-of-pearl suite that Miss Toujours has? Well, I think I ought to have that suite. I'm far too old to be climbing all those stairs and that other cabin was so small." She looked up a bit, as if in a blissful reverie. "Miss Toujours has to rush back to make some new pictures, and I'm sure that she wouldn't like to be delayed in space for weeks and weeks. So you might have her leave me a set of those lacy nighties, too. They looked so nice. And I'll have to have her seat at the Captain's table too, of course. And I'd need my own private steward. Johnny Weaver will do nicely, I think. And—"

Grandma, the morose Captain and the *Kismet's* legal officer finally straightened matters out. In return for the granting of her every whim for the rest of the voyage, Grandma agreed to return to the ship and free Stellar Transportation from any liability arising from her kidnapping. She was almost glowing over it all, but it was a beaten and broken Fogarty who finally broke the video circuit some minutes later.

Turning to the crew of the *Dirty Shame*, Grandma smiled with great innocence.

"Now, wasn't it nice of them to go to all that trouble over a little old lady like me," she said.

Lamps grinned. "You sure fixed them, Grandma. But what a pack of trouble you got us into with the law. What are we going to do with Trumble and the *Faultless* out there? The Space Patrol will chase us the rest of our lives for pulling a fast one like this."

Grandma snapped her fingers. "I knew there was something I had forgotten." She turned back to the video set. "Hello, Commodore Trumble," she called.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," came the booming voice of the Commodore.

"No, not quite. There's a small matter of amnesty for the crew of the *Dirty Shame*. If you'll just make out the papers giving them a full pardon for this whole affair, everything will be just fine."

Grandma winced at the language he used in reply. On the tail of the last string of curses, he added, "I won't do it. What do you think I am, an idiot?"

"We won't discuss the subject just at the moment, Commodore. But, really, you wouldn't want the story to get out that the big, brave, fearless Commodore Trumble got himself out-foxed by a poor little innocent old lady like me, would you? Silence comes dear, as my husband used to say to me."

"I—I—"

"And I see that the boys here have got that gun pointed in your direction again. The Space Patrol wouldn't be too happy if you brought the *Faultless* back with a few big holes in her sides, would they. And I don't know if I can stop the boys—"

The Commodore turned green, then purple, then a trifle black in the face. "I can't do it. It—it isn't legal. I—I haven't got the authority."

Grandma silenced him with a wave of her hand. "Of course you have. In the case of the Space Patrol vs. Pickens and Poof, the Solar Supreme Court ruled that Patrol Commodores, while in space, have the power to grant complete amnesty to any deserving citizens who merit it. I didn't put my eldest son Wade through law school without learning something about the subject. Furthermore, in the case of Higgins vs. Abercrombie—"

"All right. I give up. You win." The Commodore retired from the video screen, tears in his eyes.

A few hours later the *Dirty Shame* hove into sight of the *Kismet*. Grandma Perkins put on her space suit again and prepared to head back to the luxury liner, but not before she and her boys had had a small celebration, the high spot of which was another batch of fresh-baked biscuits.

Grandma then told them all good-bye and insisted on kissing each of them on their cheeks in spite of the beards. She then explained that she hated to go off and leave them like this, but that she had a contract to live up to and that she always kept her bargains. But anyway they had their pardons now and they probably wouldn't need her—much.

And it must be reported that as the tiny little figure, safe in the oversized space suit, drifted across the void that separated the two ships, more than one of the grizzled crew turned aside to wipe his eyes on a dirty sleeve.

IV

IT IS doubtful that anyone ever enjoyed a trip on the *Kismet* as much as Grandma Perkins did hers. Johnny waited on her hand and foot, she was served first at the table and she kept up a running flow of brilliant conversation. And if Captain Fogarty seemed to enjoy his meals less the latter part of the voyage than he had the first part, only the more malicious of the passengers dared to connect his loss of appetite with his new-found guest of honor.

All in all the rest of the trip was a fairly uneventful one for Grandma, save for one small incident the first night she was back on board ship. Luxuriating in her large, comfortable mother-of-pearl bed, Grandma heard a soft knocking at her door.

"Come in," she called in a small voice.

The door opened and in stalked Darling Toujours, a suitcase under her arms.

"I've come to take my cabin back, Mrs. Perkins," she said, a mean look in her eyes. "The only vacant one was the little hole in the wall they had you in the first part of the voyage, and I must say it isn't fit for a dog."

"Oh, I think you'll get used to it then," cooed Grandma.

"Well, I don't intend to be the one to do the getting used to it," snarled the actress. "You see, my dear woman, I didn't say anything about this until you were safely on board again and we could start back for Earth, because I can't afford to be late for making my next picture."

Grandma looked a little surprised. "Say anything about what?"

"About how I was in the passageway and saw you get into that space suit and let yourself out the airlock, Mrs. Perkins. I don't believe that constitutes being forced to leave against your will. Therefore, STAR doesn't owe you a thing more than your passage, if that, and I want my suite back." The actress smiled triumphantly.

"But, Miss *Toujours*, surely no one would believe such a fantastic story like that."

Darling *Toujours* began to purr softly. "Captain Fogarty would. And now, my dear, if you'll just leave, I won't have to have you put out. And you can just take off my nice lace nightie to begin with!"

"Oh, my," said Grandma, sighing deeply but making no sign of moving. "And I was so hoping that I wouldn't have to say anything about all that business and cause you so much trouble."

Darling *Toujours* looked startled. Then a distrustful look came into her eyes. "What are you talking about?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Why, on board that pirate ship I noticed that one of the men, Snake Simpson, was wearing a picture of a very pretty girl. His wife, he said, only she had run out on him many years ago. Of course, her hair was blonde, and yours is black, and you seem to have done something to your nose in the meantime, but I'd never mistake the mouth. So large for your face, you know."

"Why, you little—" the younger woman began.

"I wouldn't tell anybody in the world about it. Unless, of course, you made trouble, Mrs. Simp—I mean, Miss *Toujours*."

"Nobody in the world would believe you!" snapped the actress.

Grandma gave her a beneficent smile. "Carlton E. Carlton would. By the way, my dear, I think I know now why you wear

these nighties. But one does feel so naked in them, if you know what I mean. And now, if you'll please leave. This part of the ship is restricted to first class passengers."

WHEN the *Kismet* landed at the New York spaceport many days later, Grandma left the ship reluctantly, knowing that it marked the end of a great adventure for her. In protest against this, she took the little money she had with her and spent a full week of almost riotous living on the town, visiting all the nightclubs and the dives, flirting dangerously with men of 70 and 80, half her age, and almost getting arrested six times.

But one bright morning, her funds exhausted, she was deposited bag and baggage on the front lawn of Melissa Muir's Home for Elderly Ladies. Grandma looked the place over dourly.

"Well, I guess there's nothing left for me to do now but retire from active life and take up painting," Grandma said to herself. And picking up some of her effects, she started up the walk. Close to the front porch, however, two men stepped out from behind some shrubbery and started towards her.

"Grandma!" one of them shouted. And it was only then that she recognized Lamps and Snake, freshly shaven and with clean suits on.

"Why, Lamps O'Toole! And you, too, Snake! Whatever are you two doing at this old boneyard?" she said, hugging each in turn.

"We come to see you, Grandma," Lamps told her, bashful as a boy asking for his first date. "We had to put in to Earth for fuel, so we came by to see how you was."

Snake Simpson, plainly embarrassed at her display of affection, wriggled free from her bony embrace. "Yeah, Grandma, we come by to bring you a message from Professor Spindle. He still don't know what you did to the Suggestor Ray, but he says you're a real Icy Stein."

"You mean Einstein, Snake. That's very kind of the professor."

"And we brought you a little present to show you how much we appreciate you getting us the pardons," Lamps told her, thrusting a small package into her hands. "Don't

go and open it until we leave, though."

Grandma Perkins felt a little flustered by all the attention she was receiving. "Why, thank you very much, boys. I'm sure I'll like it."

The three of them stood quite still and quite silent for a moment or two. Then Lamps said, "Well, I guess we ought to be going, Grandma. It's been good seeing you, and take care of yourself."

"Yeah, bye," said Snake, holding out a grimy paw hoping to escape with just a handshake. He did.

The two burly spacemen strode rapidly down the walk and climbed into their aircar. Grandma stood transfixed until the little vehicle had climbed far out of sight. Then she opened the present.

In the box she found a delicate bit of jewelry—a solid gold locket. The medallion was shaped like a rocket ship, and along the side of it, spelled out in tiny diamonds, was the name, *Dirty Shame*. Grandma held it in her hands for a spell, then pulled out a bit of a lace handkerchief and honked loudly.

Turning around, she surveyed her new home again. And she began to think, which was always dangerous. Her conscience, catching the drift of her thoughts, became alarmed.

"Now, Matilda Perkins, you wouldn't dare—" her conscience said to her.

"Oh, you shut up," she retorted. "But it would be awfully nice . . ."

THE spaceship *Dirty Shame* blasted off from the spaceport in a blaze of fire and smoke. Lamps O'Toole and Snake Simpson were at the controls, and neither of them was feeling much like talking. So, for the most part as they pushed the buttons and turned the switches that headed the ship out into space, they were quiet.

After a while Snake spoke up. "We're going to miss the old dame," he ventured as they pulled clear of Earth's atmosphere.

"Keep your trap shut," growled Lamps.

"Yes, sir, if I just close my eyes, I can still see the old gal, standing there at the microfoam, giving that old Commodore the business. And you standing next to her, your mouth hanging out a mile."

Lamps gave the ship more velocity than

was necessary. "Mind your own business, Snake."

"And I can hear them funny shoes of hers, clip clapping down the corridor, bringing us a batch of fresh biscuits." Snake sat bolt upright in his chair. "Lord a-massy, if I can't even smell them biscuits right now!"

Lamps let out a curse. "Now, see what you done, Snake? You got me so riled up I can smell 'em too."

Both of them stopped, sniffed long and hard, and then let out a whoop. Throwing the *Dirty Shame* into full automatic, they dashed for the kitchen.

There, stooping over, peering into the oven, was a silver-haired, little old lady.

"Grandma!" they yelled in unison. "What are you doing here!"

Giving them her richest smile, she said, "Well, boys, I didn't raise a family of ten without knowing that hungry men need good, solid food. So I . . ."

It took a while and it took some wile and some of the best of Grandma's talking, but finally it was agreed by all hands that she would be allowed to remain on board, at least until they could get her back to Earth. And, in the end, the fresh batch of hot biscuits were probably her best argument.

After dinner, just before she headed to her cabin to slip off into a sound sleep, Lamps stopped her for one final question.

"Say, Grandma, I know this maybe sounds funny. But whatever in the world did you do to that suppressor ray?"

"Whatever do you mean?" answered Grandma with great innocence.

"Well, Professor Spindle, he looked at it, cussed at it, pulled it apart, said it couldn't possibly work, then all of a sudden he gave a big laugh and packed the whole contraption off to his laboratory. And I just wondered . . ."

Grandma Perkins snickered. "Lamps," she told him, "Promise me faithfully you won't tell a soul?" Lamps nodded.

"Well, sir, you've got a great deal to learn about women. You see, there just isn't anything made that a smart woman can't fix with a hairpin."

And plopping one last biscuit into his mouth for him, she clip-clopped down the corridor and off to bed.

SWORD OF TORMAIN

By ERIC STORM

Drifting back from the immunity of the outer planets came Caron, the fugitive, seeking the vaunted Sword of Tormain; passport to paradise; key to unimaginable secrets in the Vault of Dretheeda—enigmatic mountain of alien metal that was old when Mars was young.





I

CARON heard the news while working in a dive on Callisto, heard it from a drunken spaceman newly arrived from the inner planets, and within the minute had

called his relief and was asking for his time.

"You mean that you want to quit?" The owner, a cross-bred mutant with hooded obsidian eyes inquired. "Why?"

"That's my business." Caron leaned on the rough table that served as a desk. "Pay me off."

"Sure, but what's the hurry? Can't you wait until I can hire another bouncer?"

"No."

The owner shrugged, fumbling at an inner pocket, then slowly counted out a thin sheaf of dirty notes. "I think that you're a fool, Caron," he said in his unhuman voice. "You're safe here, safe from the Inner-World Police."

Caron shrugged counting the money.

"I can use a man like you," urged the mutant. "Stick around, maybe there'll be a partnership coming your way."

"Thanks, but no."

"I took you from the gutters, gave you a job, looked after you. Now you throw it back in my face, walk out when I need you." The mutant's spine crest trembled as it flushed a deeper red. "What would you call a man like that, Caron?"

"I wouldn't know," snapped the big Terrestrial. "You gave me a job, so what? I worked didn't I? Now I'm quitting."

"But why, man? Why?"

Caron hesitated, the money in his hand then, because what the mutant had said was true, relented a little.

"They've found the Sword of Tormain," he said quietly. "They want to open the Vault of Dretheeda."

"And that means something to you?"

"Yeah." Caron stuffed the money into a pocket and checked the blaster at his hip. "That means a hell of a lot to me."

He left the mutant glaring down at his rough desk.

Passage was hard from the outer planets, and as usual the spaceport was a mess of too few ships and too many men. Because Caron was big, had experience and could handle a jet room, and because he could bribe the right person, he managed to find a berth.

It was on an uninsured tramp, a dilapidated vessel leaking air at every plate, with the shielding worn and the atomics liable to burst in their faces without warning. Caron stared at it, then shrugged and signed the articles, agreeing to work for a nominal sum and knowing that he would never get it.

The skipper was a hard bitten pirate, an old timer who scraped a bare living by cutting out all repair bills, ignoring the safety code, and collecting his crew from the scum of the spaceports. The mate was the same, a fat sweaty man with a scar where his left ear should have been, his mouth puckered into a permanent sneer from the effects of an old blaster shot.

Caron felt almost at home.

He sweated the ship over the Asteroid

Belt, laboring like a madman to keep the pile from exploding and filling the ship with lethal radiation. He lost twenty pounds in weight and his harsh features grew even harsher as his cheeks fell in and the deep lines from nose to mouth dug into his wasting flesh.

THEY passed the outer space station, swept past the twin moons, sprayed a curtain of fire from their pitted jets, and slammed to a neck-breaking landing at Port Murphy.

Before the sand had wholly cooled, Caron had left the ship and was streaking for the perimeter. Behind him the port police yelled and a blaster flung its roaring echo after him. Desperately he ducked, tensing his leg muscles as he neared the high wire perimeter fence, throwing his body high into the thin air as he grabbed for the top of the wire.

Pain slashed through his arms as the thin strands cut into the flesh. He winced then, as the searing bolts from the police blasters reached towards him, pulled himself over the wire.

Sand slammed against the soles of his feet, jarring his bones and bringing the salty taste of blood to his mouth from bitten lips. He spat, running like a hare, his long legs thrusting at the red dust, his body weaving as he flung himself towards the shadows of looming buildings.

Behind him stormed the police.

They wanted him, Caron knew that. He was wanted by all the Inter-World Police, and even coming to Mars was tempting his luck beyond the limits of sanity. They didn't know yet who he was, of course, just thought that he was some space rat trying to land without papers, drifting back from the immunity of the outer planets. Such a man would be certain to draw a ten year penalty digging pipe lines from the poles, but for Caron it wouldn't be like that at all.

They would know him if they ever caught him. His brain wave pattern was on record and once they checked there could be no hope. They would take him far out into space, give him a suit and five hours air, then explode him from the ship and leave him to drift until he died.

Death was bad at any time, but usually it was quick, not like drifting helplessly in space, with a thin suit and a limited amount of air. Death like that would be a thousand deaths, each breath would be a constant reminder of what was to come, and the cold eyes of the mocking stars would blink and leer, jeering and laughing, bringing insanity and a terrible sense of loneliness.

Caron didn't want to die like that.

He plunged into the shadows, running between the high walls of windowless warehouses, cursing his luck at having landed at a modern spaceport. In the old towns he would have stood a chance. A man could hide there, hide among the twisting alleys and enigmatic towers of old Mars. Here. . .

Sand plumed beneath his feet as he skidded to a halt. He stared at a squat ground car, his gray eyes narrowed with sudden hope, his hand tight around the butt of his blaster. The car was of the kind used on desert expeditions, squat, with wide treads and an enclosed body. He ran to the back, tugging open the doors and casting a quick glance over his shoulder as he dived inside. Nothing. As yet the police hadn't caught up with him, but he knew that they would have alerted the area and every living thing in the streets would be checked and questioned.

Desperately he slammed the doors after him, feeling his way in the darkness, wriggling between crates and boxes making himself a small nest deep within the ground car's load. He pulled bales on top of him then, the blaster tight in one hand, lay sweating in the darkness waiting for what was to come.

He hadn't long to wait.

VOICES echoed through the thin body of the vehicle. Hard authoritative voices, the voices of the police.

"You there! This your car?"

"It is." The answering voice was gentle, the tone of a scholar, of an elderly man who was unused to violence. "Why do you ask?"

"We're looking for a criminal who came this way. Have you seen him?"

"No."

"Sure of that?"

"Certainly, I'm sure. Do you doubt my word?"

The policeman grunted and Caron tensed as light spilled through the open doors of the ground car.

"What's in here?"

"Supplies, but no one is in there."

"How do you know?"

"I know," said a third voice. "I haven't left the vehicle and I know that no one passed this way."

"You could have told us that before," snapped the policeman. He called to the others. "Nothing this way, he must have turned off at the intersection."

Caron relaxed as he heard the heavy boots of the police crunch against the sand as they ran from the ground car.

"Why did you tell them that, Earl?" The old man seemed worried. Earl laughed.

"Did you want them pulling everything out into the dust? Some of those instruments are delicate, Danver, and beside that, what of the other thing?"

"They wouldn't have stopped us."

"Are you sure about that? You know that we've had nothing but trouble ever since we landed on Mars. The natives don't like what we propose, and the authorities back up the natives. No, Danver. I did the wise thing."

"I see. Perhaps you are right, Earl, it's just that I don't like lying to the police."

"You're not on Earth now, Danver. I know Mars a little better than you do, and I know that I did the right thing." The doors slammed shut again and Caron strained his ears as he listened to the fading conversation.

"Better get moving, Danver. Everything ready?"

"Yes. We've a full load of fuel and supplies. Are you certain that you know the way?"

"Certain."

"All right then. I'll call. . ."

The voices died into silence, and in the darkness of the closed vehicle Caron sighed and wiped sweat from his streaming features.

His luck had held!

Where the car was going didn't matter. How long he would have to stay hidden didn't matter. He was safe, safe from the

searching police and the ultimate penalty.

How long he would remain safe was another matter.

He grinned a little as he felt the car quiver to the throb of the turbine engine, and deliberately relaxed, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the jolting of the moving vehicle.

He slept.

II

WHEN he awoke the car had stopped. He felt the aches in every bone and muscle. Carefully he moved from his hiding place and fumbled his way to the door of the car. He stumbled, his numb legs refusing to obey his mental commands, and as he struggled to regain his balance the blaster rang against the metal lining of the compartment.

He froze, widening his eyes in the dark, straining his ears for danger-warning sound then, as nothing disturbed the silence, moved carefully towards the doors.

He pressed against them, thinning his lips as they refused to move. He pressed harder, running his hands over the surface, feeling the locking mechanism and cursing silently as he realized that the storage compartment was locked from the outside.

Squatting on his heels he frowned in the darkness wondering what to do next. He could be in a central area, parked on a road in full view of police and civilians. He could be in some warehouse, a garage, somewhere isolated where he could starve before anyone came to open the vehicle.

He had to get out.

Carefully he lifted the blaster, aiming the pitted muzzle at where he thought the locking mechanism should be. Then, closing his eyes, he squeezed the trigger. Light flared around him, penetrating even his closed lids. Heat seared his skin, singeing his hair and filling the compartment with an oven temperature, then the light had gone and he was kicking at the sagging door of the ground car.

It opened. The cold night air of Mars replaced the heat. Frantically he scrambled from the vehicle, almost tripping as his feet slipped on fine red sand. He stared incredulously about him.

On either side stretched desert, a barren waste of red dust illuminated by the ghost-light of distant stars. A thin wind blew, freezing and stirring the fine sand with tenuous fingers, rippling it as though to the passage of invisible feet. Low on the horizon Demios cast a wan light, and a little to one side glowed the dying heart of a camp fire.

He dropped, wriggling on his belly towards the fire and the dim bulk of pneumatic tents, the blaster a pointing finger of menace in his hand. Carefully he drew near the tents, his eyes narrowed as he searched the darkness, his lips cracked and swelling as the dry air sucked the moisture from his body.

He was hungry, thirsty, aching in every limb and freezing in the cold night air. He needed shelter, food, water and fresh clothing. He needed identification papers, money, the means to travel the deserts and to move through the cities.

He could find all those things in the tents.

As usual on Mars the water bag had been raised on a tripod, the plastic bag bulging from the life giving contents within. Thirst made him a little careless, made him hurry, forcing his tired body over the gritty sand, and reckless of the sounds he was making. He reached the bag, lifted himself so that his cracked lips were beneath the spigot. Light suddenly blazed all around him.

He spun, lifting the blaster, his lips drawn back into an animal snarl. But the weapon fell from his hand as he saw the gun aimed straight at him in the cone of light from the flashlight. He saw the gun, the flashlight, and just beyond it, limned in reflected light, a face.

The face of a woman.

FOR a long moment they stared at each other. Caron found time to admire the smooth perfection of her cheeks, the wide intelligent eyes, the soft brown hair clustered in tight curls at the base of her neck. He tried to smile and she raised the blaster a little, he tried to speak and the words rasped in his parched throat, he spread his hands, palms upwards, and slowly climbed to his feet.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"I . . ." He swallowed and gestured towards his throat. "Water!"

"Take some then, but keep your hands in sight, and remember that I've got this blaster trained on your back."

Woman or not, there was ice and iron in her tones and Caron knew that she would kill him without hesitation should he make a false move. Carefully he helped himself to water, letting the ice cold liquid trickle down his throat, forcing himself to take little sips instead of gulping it all as every instinct cried out for him to do.

When he rose to his feet his throat was flexible again and he could speak.

"Thank you," he said. "You can put that gun down now."

"Maybe." She stared at him suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"A prospector," he lied. "My car broke down and I tried to make it on foot. If I hadn't seen the light of your fire I'd be dead by now. Thanks again."

Calmly he stooped and picked up his blaster, thrusting the weapon into its holster, deliberately making his actions slow and letting her see that he had no intention of using the gun. He straightened and smiled, rubbing ruefully at the stubble on his lips and chin.

"I must look a mess," he said casually. "I couldn't spare water for washing and I dropped most of my gear to save weight."

"Where are you from," she snapped. "Where are you bound?"

"From Phoryipha and I was trying to make Port Murphy." He frowned up at the stars. "Guess I wandered off course a little. Where are we?"

"About four hundred miles from Port Murphy. I don't know how far from Phoryipha, I've never heard of the place."

"No?" He shrugged, blinking a little in the strong light. "Stranger here?"

"Yes."

"Traveling alone?"

"No."

"Sociable aren't you?" He shrugged again and moved towards the tents. "Maybe your husband will know how to treat an honest traveler. Just in case you haven't noticed it, I'm just about freezing to death."

Steadily he walked towards the larger of the two tents.

SHE let him take three strides then the thunder of her weapon sent flat echoes from the surrounding desert. He stopped, freeing his instinctive motion towards his holster, knowing that she could blast him down any time she wanted to.

Again the blaster split the night with its shaft of flame, the pitted muzzle tilted towards the distant stars, and as the echoes died so voices sounded from the tent.

"Sonya! What's wrong?"

"Nothing, father. Where's Earl?"

"Here." A young man thrust himself from the tent, his short leather jacket open and his hair rumpled from sleep. He held a blaster in his hand and pointed it at Caron with familiar ease. "What is it, Sonya?"

"I heard something, it sounded like a shot, and when I investigated I found this man stealing our water."

"Did you now." Earl grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the starlight, a ring on his little finger shining as he gestured with the heavy weapon. "Come inside, you, come where we can get a look at you. Sonya, check the ground car, will you, I've got an idea."

Caron glanced at her, then at the man before him, noting the position of their guns and the tension of their fingers as they curved around the triggers. He hesitated a little, then shrugged. Unless he got shelter soon he would die from exposure, and if he tried to fight it out he would die from a blaster bolt.

Either way he had no chance.

Inside the tent was surprisingly warm and comfortable. An old man stared at them from where he sat on a pneumatic mattress and Caron guessed that this must be Danver. Neither of them said anything, Earl taking his gun and gesturing him to sit in a corner, then taking up a position by the tent flap. The woman entered, her face white with rage as she stared at Caron.

"He smashed the doors of the ground car. Looks like a blaster fused the lock. We won't be able to repair it."

"I see." Earl smiled, his thin lips curving beneath a thin mustache. "Well? What did the police of Port Murphy want you for?"

"Me?" Caron looked blank. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't act dumb with me, space rat! You hid in the car didn't you, and then shot your way out when you found the doors locked. Well? What are you wanted for?"

"Unauthorized landing," said Caron sullenly. "What are you going to do about it, turn me in?"

"Perhaps." Earl smiled again, a thin sadistic smile, his mustache writhing on his upper lip. "Or perhaps we'll just leave you here and let you find your own way back to Port Murphy."

"We can't do that, Earl," said the old man nervously. "He'd die out here."

"What of it? What do we care about a space rat like him? We didn't ask him to steal a ride. Why should we worry what becomes of him?"

"That would be murder, Earl," said the woman. "We can't do it."

"Then what do you suggest? Take him with us?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what?" Earl shrugged and stared at Caron. "Well, space rat? Have you anything to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" The big man stared coldly at Earl, his harsh face bitter in the soft light of the portable lamp. "Beg for my life? Plead? Get down on my knees?" He laughed curtly, a laugh without humor, and stared at the woman. "Well I'm going to surprise you. I am going to beg for my life, beg that you will take me to the nearest settlement."

"We can't do that," she said, then stopped as if she had said too much.

"Why not? It isn't much to ask. Just drop me off within walking distance of a town. I promise not to bother you."

Something in his tone made her bite her lips and she stared questioningly at Earl and her father. Danver shook his head, Earl scowled.

"You know we can't do that," he said flatly. "It means too much delay, going too far out of our way. My suggestion is the best."

"Kill me?" Caron sucked in his breath, staring at the woman, ignoring the young man's scowls. "Listen," he said urgently. "I don't ask this for myself, I want you to believe that, but it is important that I get to a settlement. I can help you. I know Mars

as well as any man, know the safe routes and the friendly tribes. I can guide you, get you to wherever it is you are going. If I do this will you help me in return?"

He waited for their answer, a cold film of sweat glistening on his face, his muscles trembling as he edged towards the threatening blaster.

"You seem strangely eager to get to a settlement," mused Earl. His eyes flamed with suspicion as he jerked the blaster level with Caron's stomach. "Are you a spy? Did you fix things so that we would believe you to be a fugitive, perhaps trust you because of that? Do you intend stopping us?"

"No."

"Dare we take the chance?" Danver nervously licked his lips, drawing a blanket around his thin shoulders. "If he is a spy, if he should warn the police, the tribes, try and stop us . . ." He looked appealingly at the big man. "Would you try to stop us?"

"No."

"It has been so hard," whimpered the old man. "Everyone seemed to be against me. Everyone. And now when we're so near, almost within two days journey, this has to happen."

"Shut up, Danver," gritted Earl. "I'll stop his mouth!"

"But could he stop us? Could he prevent our reaching the Vault?"

"The Vault?" Caron stared at the old man. "The Vault of Dretheeda?"

"Yes. You know of it?"

Caron laughed eerily.

III

THE sun blazed like a white eye in the heavens, striking through the thin air and reflecting from the arid dust of the desert. It seared them with unshielded ultraviolet and the dry air sucked the sweat from their pores as soon as it was formed. Thirst became a living thing, and water more precious than refined gold.

Caron stood on the top of the ground car and surveyed the surrounding desert, his hand shielding his eyes, his harsh features thoughtful. Earl squinted up at him, and Sonya stood at his side, her white shirt and slacks stained now, soiled, damp and clinging to the full curves of her lithe figure.

"See anything?" Earl wiped his thin face and narrowed his eyes against the sun-glare as he stared at the big man. Caron nodded and jumped lightly from the top of the car.

"Yes. Better give me my blaster, Earl, there's a full tribe of natives between us and the Vault."

"They won't attack." Earl made no attempt to hand over the weapon. "They wouldn't dare. The Guards would decimate them if they touched us."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" Caron stared at the young man, then at the girl. "These are nomadic natives, on their own reservation, and the Guards won't touch them no matter what they do. They know that we carry water, food, arms, and they might even know that you intend breaking their strongest taboo. Better make your boy friend give me a blaster. It may be too late soon."

"What will they do to us?"

"Kill us, rob us, take all you possess. That's if we're lucky. If we're not . . ." He shrugged and looked into the driving cab. Danver smiled at him and leaned forward. The old man looked ill, twin spots of red burned high on his sallow cheeks, but his eyes glittered with excitement and he hugged a long flat case against his chest.

"How far now, Caron?"

"Not far. I could just see the Vault from the roof of the car but there are natives in front of us. We may have to shoot our way through."

"A fight?"

"Yes. If you've got any authority with your daughter's boy friend, better tell him to give me a blaster. I've a feeling that I'm going to need one pretty soon now."

"As bad as that?"

"Yeah."

"I see." The old man looked worried, his thin old hands roving over his mysterious case, and the twin spots of color burning even brighter against his skin. "Earl," he called. "Earl, come here a moment."

"What is it, Danver?"

"Give Caron his gun."

"Not on your life! Why he'd shoot us in the back and take all we have."

"Give it to him, Earl." The old man stared at the young one. "I order you to give it to him."

"You're crazy!"

"Do as he says, Earl." Sonya stood beside the young man. "If what Caron says is right, then every gun will count."

"But . . ."

"Thanks," said Caron grimly. With a deft motion he slipped the young man's blaster from its holster and held it poised easily in his hand. "I'll take yours, Earl. You can have mine." He grinned at the angry expression on the young man's thin features. "I suggest we get moving now. The nearer we can get to the Vault the safer we will be."

Silently they crowded into the driving cab.

THE attack came at twilight, just as the sun lowered itself to the horizon and the black curtain of night began to sweep across the desert. The ground car shuddered as something smashed against the wide treads, lurched, almost toppled, then slewed the turbine whining in sudden release from load.

Earl cursed, savagely jerking at the controls, then slumped in his seat, his thin face white as he stared at them in the dying light.

"One of the treads must be broken. We're stuck!"

"No." Caron squinted through the wind-screen and jerked open the door. "Outside quickly! They will attack as soon as it's dark. Maybe we can escape, get within the taboo zone around the Vault, but if we stay here we're as good as dead."

"But aren't they waiting out there?" Sonya bit her lower lip in worry and doubt. "What damaged the car?"

"A sneak raid. The natives are clever that way." Caron jerked his head at them and waited impatiently for them to leave the vehicle. "A couple of them levered off a tread, probably weakened it when we slowed down at that last stretch of rock, or maybe they drenched it with natural acid at our last stopping place. That doesn't matter now, what does matter is that they will attack the car at nightfall, remember they want the water and arms, our turn will come later."

He was hurrying them along as he spoke, his hard eyes flickering over the dun colored rock and sand stretching about them. He

hissed a warning, crouching behind a rock, the blaster leaping from its holster to his hand. Silently they joined him, guns at the ready, their bodies tense as they heard a slight rustling noise.

Two Martians moved towards the wrecked car.

Tall they were, almost eight feet from their claw toes to their naked heads. Four limbs carried the brown, chiton-hard bodies. Two appendages held crude swords and axes. Their faces were pointed, insect like, but with humanoid eyes and mouth. They rustled a little as they walked, and from them wafted a bitter sweet odor.

They passed, and the little group breathed again. Caron gestured silently and hastily they wended their way between the rocks, following the big man's footsteps. Before them rose a thing of symmetrical beauty, a cone-shaped, smoothly fashioned structure of dull metal. It rested among the rock and sand, reflecting the light a little, and yet somehow monstrous and alien. Caron stared at it, then pointed with his blaster.

"The Vault of Dretheeda," he said quietly. "We are almost within the taboo area. Another mile and no native of Mars will touch us." He grinned a little at the rapt expression on the old man's face. "Time for staring later," he said quietly. "Now we've got to make that extra mile."

Cautiously he weaved a track between the rock, the others following him. All around them they could hear the rustling of Martians, waiting for the setting of the sun before sweeping forward to overpower the wrecked ground car. The acrid odor of the natives filled the air, seemed to clog their throats and fill their lungs with fire. It tore at delicate membranes, and made eyes stream with irritant tears.

Suddenly Earl sneezed.

FOR a moment silence held, a deep silence, the hushed and waiting silence of night and space. Then a native moved, another, a flood of them, a tide of surging brown bodies, filling the air with their reek and rustle.

Caron snarled, the blaster a spouting machine of destruction in his hand, and between the roar and thunder of the shots he rapped quick instructions.

"Sonya! Get beside your father. Earl! Close up. Move now! Move towards the Vault, it's our only chance!"

Brown bodies collapsed in a jumble of twitching limbs and threshing heads as the searing bolts from the blasters did their terrible work. Axes and swords swung at them, wielded by dead limbs, by seared and burned bodies, by natives incinerated in a bath of flame.

Animals would have rushed to utter destruction. Insects would have ignored pain and death, driven by blind reflex action and instinct. The natives of Mars were neither animal nor insect.

They learned.

They learned the power of the Terrestrial weapons. They learned the searing destruction from the blasters, and they were intelligent enough to reason their logical answer to unequal fire power.

They began to throw their weapons.

Axes hurled towards the little group, stone axes and a few of hammered metal, crude weapons but just as powerful as the most modern blaster when flung by a powerful limb.

Caron staggered as an axe struck his shoulder, the sharp edge drawing blood. Sonya whimpered as a thrown sword swept by her arm, slashing the shirt from her body with the nearness of its passing. Earl snarled as he fell, terror in his cursing as blood streamed from a wounded thigh. Danver sobbed, stumbled, cried out and fell again. A thin shaft protruded from between his shoulders.

Sonya screamed, flung herself beside the writhing body of her father, her pale face wet with tears. Caron knocked her aside and swept up the limp figure in his powerful arms, still triggering the blaster as he ran towards the looming bulk of the mysterious Vault.

The others staggered after him, the fire from their weapons splitting the night with streaks of searing brilliance, turning the sand to molten glass and turning rock red with savage heat.

Abruptly the attack ceased.

CARON gulped at the thin air, staggering a little beneath his burden light as it was in the weak gravity. In his arms the old

man moaned, the blood from his wound dark in the pale light of the distant stars. Earl made as if to pull out the slender spear and Caron knocked his hand from the thin shaft.

"No. It is barbed, we shall have to cut it from the wound." Gently he set the old man down on a level patch of sand, and stooped over the ugly wound. When he straightened his face was set. Sonya could read his expression.

"He will die!"

"Yes," said Caron. "The blade has almost severed his spine. Medical surgery could possibly save him but . . ." He gestured around him. There was no need for words.

Impossible to carry a sick man three hundred miles to the nearest settlement. Impossible to even walk that far without food, without water, over hostile desert and through enemy tribes. Impossible for a sick man, much less a dying man. Impossible even for those with their full health.

Danver would not die alone.

He lay on the red dust, an old man, a weak one, and yet the fire in his eyes was undimmed and still he clutched the case to his chest as he rested on his side.

"Sonya," he whispered. "Earl, Caron, listen." He breathed and the sound of his breathing was as water gurgling through a pipe. He coughed, and his mouth and chin were stained with blood.

"The Vault," he whispered. "The Vault of Dretheeda. Open it. Discover the secrets within, for science, for Mars, for all men everywhere. The Sword of Tormain is the key. Use it. Use the Sword of Tormain."

His hand thrust at the flat case, pushing it towards the sobbing girl. Caron stared at it with hungry eyes. The Sword of Tormain! Legendary key to the huge Vault of Dretheeda, depository of what unimaginable secrets of long dead science? Wealth could lie within that cone-shaped mountain of alien metal. Secrets which would give a man the universe as a toy, make him a God. Even, it was whispered, make him immortal.

Caron sighed, then forgot the case as he stooped over the dying man. Sonya nursed her father's head in her lap, her tears washing some of the blood from his mouth. He

struggled as if to say one last word. He writhed, his mouth opening, his throat working as he tried to speak through clogging blood. He stiffened, jerked, relaxed to the red sand, dead.

IV

THE night had passed and day had come before they moved from the spot where the old man had died. They left him where he was, no grave, no cairn of broken stone, nothing to mark the spot. The sleethin would come and eat his flesh, they would shatter his bones and rip at his garments. They would do this even though he rested ten feet deep, the tiny insect-like scavengers of the Martian deserts. To bury him would have been wasted time and effort.

Earl now carried the flat metal case. He carried it as though it were his passport to paradise, his hope of heaven, greedily, hungrily, jealously. Caron glanced at him but said nothing, his arm supporting the grief stricken girl.

The day passed, the sun climbing to zenith, and thirst came with nagging spears of anguish, with dry mouths and cracked lips, with swollen throats and burning fires.

Still they struggled forward to the enigmatic mound of alien metal. Behind them waited death at the hands of hostile desert or savage natives. Before them lay—what?

No man knew. But Caron could guess.

He paused for a moment, tilting back his head and narrowing his eyes as he stared at the looming bulk of the mysterious Vaults of Dretheeda. Old they were. Old when even Mars was young. Visible evidence of legend and a score of varying myths. A strange race had built it, an Elder Race from the stars, old when the first Martian had broken his shell and rustled from his egg. The natives spoke of it, whispering in their dry clicking speech, or emotionlessly in their learned Terrestrial. Venusians came to the Red World and stared and remembered half forgotten legends of their own amphibious kingdoms. Earthmen wondered at it and felt uncomfortable as they remembered tales of elves and gnomes, giant castles and strange swords with magic powers.

But no man living knew what the Vaults contained.

Earl had almost reached the base of the towering mountain before Caron recommenced his journey. The man seemed tiny against the huge pile, and Caron narrowed his eyes with swift suspicion as he saw the young man frantically searching the smooth metal.

"Earl," he shouted. "Earl, wait for us." Desperately he urged the girl into a stumbling run, their feet slipping on the fine sand, their breath rasping through their parched throats.

Still Earl ignored them, running around the base of the Vault as they stumbled rapidly closer.

"Earl!"

Caron stared at him, at the flat case now open, at the faint, almost invisible marking against the smooth dark metal.

"What's the hurry, Earl?"

"Nothing. I just thought that I'd find the right place." The young man nervously licked his lips and pointed with his finger. "I think that I've found it. See?"

Caron didn't follow the pointing finger. He stood, wide legged, his hands on his hips and spoke sharply to the girl.

"Sonya. Get the case."

"What?"

"Get the case, girl. Hurry!"

HE STOOD, tense and ready for violent action while she fetched the case, and only then did he relax.

"There's no hurry, Earl. When we decide to investigate we'll do it together. All three of us at the same time."

"You scum! Who are you to tell me what to do? Sonya. Bring the case over here to me. We want no part of this space rat!"

The young man trembled with rage. Real or pretended, Caron neither knew nor cared. He stared at the other man, his harsh face taut, his cold eyes hard, and his hand rested as if by accident on the butt of his blaster.

"Sonya," he said quietly. "Get out of the line of fire."

"No!" Suddenly she was between them, the long case pressed tight against her chest, her eyes wide. "Earl! Caron! What are you thinking of? Father's dead and you two are acting like . . ." She sagged, her delicate features a twisted mask of grief, and automatically Caron stooped towards her, trying

to give her comfort.

A shadow warned him.

A flickering shadow dancing across the sunlit sand. A dancing streak of blackness against the brightness, the shadow cast by a rapidly moving arm.

He ducked, and the blaster bolt seared the air where his head had been. He rolled, and sand stung his face with a million red hot needles. He twisted, and the blaster in his hand roared once, then again, and yet a third time, the shots mingling and sounding as one.

Where Earl had stood rested a pile of smoking ash.

"Caron!" Sonya ran towards him, the soft flesh of her upper arm red and angry looking from the searing heat of a too close blaster shot. Staring at it the big man regretted killing Earl so plainly then, holding the trembling girl in his arms, he led her to the shadowed side of the tower.

Later they talked.

"**F**ATHER was always interested in the Dretheeda legend," she explained, "and when he heard of the Sword of Tormain he guessed at once that it must be the key. For a long time he searched for it, spending almost all his money offering rewards and making journeys to examine a thousand objects which the owners claimed to be the key. Almost he was taken in by several, almost he thought that the Sword could not exist, that it must have been destroyed or lost during the millenia. Then a friend of his claimed to have discovered the Sword, and he knew that he was on the right track."

"This friend," said Caron tautly. "Was his name Bennet?"

"Yes, did you know him?"

Caron shrugged, not speaking, and after a moment she continued her story.

"Bennet had a Sword. He claimed that he had undeniable proof that it was the genuine Sword of Tormain, and as soon as father saw it he knew that Bennet must be lying."

"Why?" Caron stared at the distant horizon and spoke before the girl could answer. "Was it because he had seen exactly the same kind of object for sale elsewhere?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"Never mind. What happened then?"

"Naturally Bennet wouldn't sell the Sword, he wouldn't even permit him to join the expedition to the Vault. That made father very angry, and he bought what seemed to be the copy of Bennet's Sword. He bought it and waited, and waited, and waited, but Bennet never came back. He must have been killed by the natives before he could open the Vault, and so father sold all we owned and tried to organize a second expedition."

"Bennet did not die," said Caron thickly. "He had money, lots of money, and he bought a flying machine, a heliocab and hired a pilot. He came here. He used the Sword. He opened the Vault and entered within. He insisted on going alone, he wouldn't even let the pilot go with him, instead he told the man to wait until he returned. He never did return. The pilot waited until his food ran out, his water, until he could wait no longer."

"Then?"

"Then he returned to Port Murphy and was arrested on suspicion of murder. They said that he had killed the rich man and had stolen his heliocab and money. They arrested him, tried him, sentenced him to death. He escaped, ran to the outer planets, and waited. He waited five years until the Vaults could be opened a second time, and now he is here."

"You?"

"Yes." Caron thinned his lips with savage bitterness. "I was the pilot. What kept you so long?"

"We had to obtain the Sword, then the authorities wouldn't let us travel to the Vault. We had to sneak out. Earl was a local guide we found. He agreed to work for a share of what we found."

"Then he grew greedy, decided that it would be a good idea to take it all." Caron nodded and slowly rose to his feet. "Well, let us see just what it does contain shall we?"

He stooped and picked up the flat case.

V

THE Sword of Tormain was not a sword. That is it had no sharp edge, no point, and the hilt was never designed for a human

hand, but despite all this, a sword was the nearest thing by which to describe it.

The blade was a flat oval, an inch wide and twenty inches long. The guard was a convoluted pattern of gleaming metal, carved and studded, worked and ornamented by long dead hands. The pommel was a single gem and the hilt . . . ? A tentacle could have held it, or perhaps a claw, but no human hand could both grip and wield the sword, if sword it was.

Caron knew that it wasn't.

"This is a key," he explained as he lifted it from the case and let the sunlight gleam from the jeweled guard. "An atomic key, operated by the constituents of the alloy in the blade, similar to an electronic lock which can only be opened by the right tone of voice, the correct hand pattern, or even, as now, the correct brain wave pattern. Nothing but this exact combination of metals will open the Vault."

He stepped around the base of the tower and paused before a barely visible tracery of lines.

"This is where Bennet used the key. Here!" Caron raised the Sword of Tormain and poised the end of the dull metal blade opposite a narrow slit in the metal tower.

"He inserted it, the Vault opened, and he entered to vanish from human sight." Caron stared at the pale face of the girl. "Well? Shall we follow him?"

"Dare we?"

"We have no option," he said grimly. "We can't get back to Port Murphy. We can't walk three hundred miles to the nearest settlement, and even if we could get through the natives, what shall we do for water? No, Sonya, we have no choice."

Abruptly, with an almost feral motion, he slammed the sword home in the narrow slot.

Nothing happened!

For a long, breath-stopping moment nothing happened, then. . . .

Energy flamed over the metal of the tower. Subtle pulsing energy, vibrant, shot with a writhing flow of color, beautiful, strange, and somehow utterly alien.

It flared, died, and an opening dilated in the smooth metal, the sword falling from the gap and thudding onto the sand at Caron's feet.

Within the opening a chamber yawned, metal lined, blank walled, luminous with buried light. Caron picked up the sword, glanced at the girl, and stepped within the chamber.

White faced and trembling Sonya followed him.

"An inner door," murmured the big man, "Just like an air lock. Before the inner door can open, the outer must close." He raised the sword, searching for the slot he knew must be there. Sonya clung to him, trembling with sudden fear.

"I don't like it," she murmured. "I'm afraid!"

"Yes," he said, and stared somberly at the enigmatic wall before them. "Whoever built this place, whatever built it, must have valued it highly. They made sure that no one could ever enter by accident, but like any sensible person they provided it with many keys. A few must have become lost during the years. Bennet found one, your father another. I wonder just how many more there are lying around the solar system, things of legend and worship, Heroical Swords, Talismans, Relics. Will anyone ever enter this place again?"

He sighed, shrugged, raised the sword and thrust it into a second slot.

A GAIN came the slight delay, as of incredibly ancient machinery taking a little time to gather its energy, or perhaps a slight hesitation until it finally recognized the key. Behind them the opening contracted, swept together and sealed into an unbroken wall. Before them color flamed and slowly the narrow slot widened to a round opening.

Before them lay incredible splendor.

Sonya gasped and Caron felt her tremble as she shrank into his arms. Despite the thrill of her nearness he didn't look at her, his whole attention was centered on the startling sight before him.

Color shimmered, wave upon wave of scintillant glory, stretching as far as the eye

could see, much further that the external limits of the tower. It stretched in strange convulsions, writhing, changing, a glorious vista of incredible glory.

It numbed the eye, stultified the senses, drugged and bewildered with sheer sensory perfection. Energy laved them, subtle forces penetrating flesh and bone and muscle. Thirst vanished, hunger, fatigue. Caron breathed invisible perfume and felt a rushing tide of life surge through his every cell.

For a moment he felt as a God must feel, standing on Olympus and laughing at the world of men.

Sonya stirred, her features radiant, her body limned in splendor. Caron stared at her, marveling at her beauty, knowing that of all the women in the System, she was the one destined for him.

Within the mist of shimmering glory something moved.

It wavered, ghost-like, a thing of light and energy, a thing of dreams and blazing color. It halted just within the world of light.

Their minds reeled to the sudden shock of telepathic knowledge.

"Bennet," gasped Caron. "It's Bennet!"

He paused, cocking his head as if listening, his mind surging with cheerful thoughts, welcoming, happy, unbearably clear and vibrant.

"He entered the chamber," he murmured, more to himself than to the woman at his side. "He entered and was—changed. The Vault of Dretheeda is a machine, a mesh of intra-atomic energies. The Elder Race must have built it for what? A hospital? A playground? A nursery? Who knows but one thing is certain, for us it spells immortality, eternal life divorced from care and pain. Paradise!"

He smiled at the girl at his side then, hand in hand, they entered the bewitching glory before them.

Behind them the wall flowed together, sealing the Vault for eternity.

Against all harm.



MIMSY'S JOKE

By MILLARD GRIMES

Nance smiled foolishly. The long trip back to Earth from Mars wouldn't be at all dull. It might well be one long delicious chuckle over a great, grim and incredible joke. And wouldn't Nance's little cocker spaniel appreciate it most of all?

HE WAS lying in the grass and his cute little cocker spaniel was nibbling on his ear when the message came. He was breathing the fragrant air of spring and feeling cool spring breeze and the solid earth under the grass beneath him, while the dog with doleful eyes delighted him with her tricks.

His name was Oscar Nance, and he was

the world's top archaeologist. That was why the message came to him when the UN began selecting a crew for Earth's first expedition to Mars:

"We want you," the message read. It was an invitation that was difficult to refuse. He cuffed the cocker on the ear. She barked softly and let her tongue hang out at the cutest angle. "Good-bye, Mimsy," he said.

The dog was all he had on this world. "I'll miss you, lady," Nance told the dog. She licked his hand.

Then Nance raised his six-three form from the soft grass and started with a careless gait toward the boarding house where he lived during infrequent visits to his home town. Usually he took Mimsy with him on his trips but he knew this trip would not be available for pets.

He stopped at the house and told his landlady to be sure and take care of the dog while he was gone. "I sure will," the landlady told him. She already had Mimsy's supper of liver and dog bisquits waiting on the hearth.

A day later, Oscar Nance became a part of man's grandest adventure. . . .

The place where the first earth ship to Mars landed was very cold and very dead. The commander of the expedition was a gruff, retired Army general who had a smattering of science and a great deal of command. His crew, with the exception of two handy men, was composed of the leading persons in all branches of Terran science. None of them were women, and most of them were young.

Oscar Nance was 34. He had been around the world 10 times, with particular emphasis on Easter Island and the Antarctica.

The ship had taken two weeks to bridge the gap between Earth and Mars. The voyage had been smooth. Every man aboard knew his job, and they were following a plan that the U. N. had worked on for 20 years. Boone, the commander, had been a top general in World War III. He was efficient, stern, colorless to the point that he was almost colorful.

Immediately upon landing, Boone had dispatched two cats to take the first steps onto Mars. The cats suffered no ill effects, and now the Commander was preparing for the crew to explore the new world.

He pointed to Nance and Zoologist Braun. "You, Nance, and Braun, and myself, will form one group," he said. He quickly divided the remaining twelve men into three groups. One was to stay at the ship, the other two would be exploring units.

When the small group of Earthmen descended from the ship to alien soil, Com-

mander Boone's businesslike manner seemed to take much of the glamour from the moment. "No heroics, Commander?" Physicist Allgood asked.

Boone was not a man for ceremony. "We're here," he said. "We must see what is here. We must get back."

WHAT was there was not a great deal. Some vegetation did exist, and there was a thin coat of snow spread over the few scraggly trees. Commander Boone surveyed the surrounding land through his spyglass, then suddenly lowered it with a set expression on his face. "There's a city to the North," he announced. He checked the group's immediate enthusiasm with a harsh bellow. "There's no movement there," he barked. "And from the looks of the buildings there's been no life there for centuries. However, if there is intelligent life, we will find it there, but it may not be friendly."

Boone studied the buildings to the North for another moment, then turned to Nance and Braun. "We three will explore the city," he rasped into the thin air. "You others will fan out in other directions and meet back here in an hour." He paused emphatically. "If we do not come back, bring every weapon in the ship when you come to get us. I repeat, life here, if any, may not be friendly. That is why we can't afford to risk the whole party on an expedition to the city."

Nance and Braun followed the stern old General as he set out on foot in a northward direction. The other parties went their own way. The three men spoke sparingly during the hour's walk to the buildings. Mars was too quiet, almost like a funeral parlor, Nance thought, and perhaps the corpses were waiting on their slabs in the city now rising before them. The air was tolerable but cold, and the sun was fighting a losing battle with a heavy fog. Nance finally made out the form of the structures when they were only a mile away. As they drew nearer, he noticed that the buildings were made of solid stone, apparently, and rivaled the pyramids in height. There were gigantic cracks in the walls of many, and a few had crumbled to the ground.

As the three entered the city, Nance

dropped to his knees and examined the stone closely. "Good Lord," he gasped, "Mars must have been deserted for thousands of years. It would require that long for stone like this to deteriorate."

Boone stared at the winding street between the fallen buildings. "Then no intelligent life exists here," he said.

Braun looked up from a small flower which he'd found. "I challenge that statement, Commander," he said. "Life could exist here today. Perhaps the life that is here just doesn't know how to keep house very well, and let the work of its ancestors go to ruin."

"Well, then, let's investigate," Boone ordered. He led the way into the nearest structure, a gnarled hand falling close to the automatic which hung at his side. But there was nothing in the building save the rubble of a dead civilization and rusted machines which once must have given life and meaning to Mars.

They left and went on to the second building. Here they found life.

Life was in a back room that had one small window to admit light. Nance entered. The light was so dim that he did not see it at first. He saw it when it moved, slowly, clumsily in a far corner, as if awaking from a long sleep. Nance quickly shone his flashlight over the room and onto the life.

"Commander Boone, Braun, come here," he shouted. The other two men were at his side almost instantly.

Nance directed his beam of light to the face of the creature in the corner. The creature looked remarkably like a man. He had huge jowls and long overlapping ears, and was somewhat fat. He blinked tiny eyes at the light for a moment and finally managed to get a look at his visitors.

In English, he growled, "So you've come at last." The flash quivered in Nance's hand. He remembered his first trip into the pyramids, and suddenly he knew how he would have felt if King Tut's mummy had spoken to him—in English.

Boone's voice quavered. "It speaks English. That's not possible."

It was gruff, drawling English, sometimes not plain, but it was English. And it kept coming. "I've waited so long," the creature

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said. He lifted an arm in welcome. Nance noted the fingers were joined together. "I've waited and paid with each moment for an error my ancestors made." He moved his shaggy head and surveyed the crumbled room. "Now my abode is not fit to receive guests," he rumbled.

"Who. . . What are you?" Commander Boone managed, making a gallant effort to sound authoritative.

Braun suddenly laughed. "He looks like a comic strip St. Bernard," he roared, and then laughed some more at the thought. Boone glared at him, obviously not sharing his mirth.

The creature laughed also. He leaned his head back and laughed uproariously. "My name is Staang," he said. "I am a Martian . . . naturally . . . in your language. And I am something more than a Martian in your language." A new wave of laughter shook the creature.

"Are there any more here like you?" Commander Boone demanded.

"A few, just a few," Staang said. "But won't you sit down. There's not much to offer you in the way of comfort, but the floor will do. There must be things you'd like to ask me."

Staang rose to his feet with evident effort. "Moving," he grunted, "how I detest moving." He took a box from an indenture in the wall and began eating the contents, apparently a type of meat. He ate the bone and all. Staang glared at his guests through shaggy eyebrows and smiled. "You're puzzled," he said. "You don't understand my knowing about you, do you?" He seemed extremely pleased with himself.

Nance began doing the talking. "Do you mean Martians have visited the Earth?" he asked.

Staang chuckled loudly. "Yes . . . yes, I do mean that. Come, let me tell you a story, my friends. I am sure you will find it most interesting."

"Wait a minute," Boone barked, his hand now touching his gun. "We're here for facts. You're coming back to our ship—peacefully or by force."

"Peacefully, I assure you, Commander," Staang said. "But my story—"

"Let him tell it," Braun said. "Maybe it will explain things. And a lot needs ex-

plaining. He seems to have been expecting us."

"I have, I have," the Martian muttered, disposing of the last of his food. He threw the box into a corner already piled high with rubble. "You saw the buildings here in this . . . what was once a great city. These buildings are a few which are left of a civilization which grew weary. 'Twas not a young race as the one which fostered your world, but an old race which tired of working—even of thinking. The civilization went untended, until finally my ancestors decided they would have to invade another world to find servants to relieve Martians of the work—and the thinking—which they had grown to dislike so much. They reasoned that with proper servants they would have nothing to do but eat and sleep as they wanted.

"So my people invaded another planet."

"You had space travel then?" Boone demanded. "How long ago was this?"

"Three thousand . . . maybe four thousand years ago as you count time."

"But with space travel four thousand years ago," Nance stammered, "it seems the first planet you would have visited would have been ours—Earth."

Staang laughed again. "Perhaps it was," he said. "But let me finish my story."

"As I said, my people were fat and lazy, as I am now. Thus, open fighting as a means of bringing another race to be our slaves was out of the question. They had to find another way. And they did.

"Our first troops were sent to Agar, and they reported very satisfactory results. Soon, practically the whole population migrated to Agar and the Agarians became our slaves. A few Martians, such as my ancestors, remained here. They kept the record of this invasion and also recorded all correspondence between this planet and Agar. Ah, would they had gone also, so that today I would have nothing to do but eat and sleep, as most of my race does—on Agar." He yawned at the thought. "Do not think badly of my race," he implored suddenly. "Some day your people also will grow old and tired."

Boone grabbed Staang by the arm and shook him firmly. "But where does Earth come in?" he demanded.

Staang gazed at the stern old General and then once again burst into peals of laughter. "You see," he giggled. "We Martians have another name for your Earth. We call it Agar. Your world is the one my ancestors invaded thousands of years ago. Your people are my people's slaves until today."

"Wh . . . what is he saying?" Nance stammered.

"You're crazy," Boone bellowed. "Now I know that you are crazy."

"That was the nice thing about our invasion," Staang explained patiently. "The Earthmen did not even realize that they were being invaded—do not even realize today that they are slaves. My people, in their long stay on Earth, have grown even lazier, and particularly their brains have become sluggish during the long years of inaction. Also there have been slight handicaps incurred because of conditions on your world.

"For thousands of years there was regular communication between this planet and our invaders on Earth. The records were kept faithfully by the few Martians remaining here, and in my long years of almost complete solitude I learned your language and the history of my people on your world. I knew that perhaps in my lifetime Earthmen would reach this planet. One of my people predicted in 1396 that your world would attain space travel in the latter part of the 20th century."

Nance stumbled for words. What creatures of Earth could this being be speaking of, that had such power and progress.

But Staang was talking again in his gruff tones. "Correspondence ceased before my birth. I suppose my people grew too lazy, but the main objective had been reached. There is no work for the higher class Martians on your world, only an easy life with servants plenteous."

"Wait," spoke up Braun. "You said higher class Martian. Are there different breeds?"

"Oh, there are many breeds of Martians. Naturally, we had a slave type here in the height of our civilization, and these slaves were worked into your scheme of things to continue being slaves. They aid you Earthmen so that you may better serve the aristocratic Martians."

"But why haven't we seen the Martians?"

Braun exclaimed. "I've seen nothing on Earth like you."

"No?" said Staang. "Our records say you Earthmen love us and are happy to serve."

NANCE had been studying Staang's features with a practiced eye, the incredibility of his thoughts silencing his tongue.

But suddenly he realized that the creature was telling the truth—to a point. He knew that the Martians had invaded Earth. "Look at him, Commander," Nance said. "Don't you see the resemblance, Martians are on Earth, but we call them—"

"Good Grief!" exclaimed Commander Boone.

Staang snickered. "You call us 'Man's Best Friend,' I believe," he offered.

Braun gasped, "*Dogs.*"

"Of course," Nance said. "Notice Staang's droopy ears, the long nose, his hands and feet resemble paws. And since Earth's gravity is greater than Mars', wouldn't that tend to pull a person's arms toward the ground, making them essentially four-footed, instead of two-armed and two-legged as Staang still is."

"That's what happened to the Martians when they came to Earth, but I don't suppose they cared. It probably made it easier to walk, and they got what they wanted. After all, don't we feed the dogs, provide them a place to sleep. They have no real work to do, and only a few are mistreated. Hounds and others of that type must be the slaves Staang is speaking of. The poodles, terriers, and cockers—those strictly pets—must be the higher type." He almost choked when he got to cocker. He tried not to think of Mimsy as an invader, with him as her slave, but he realized that it amounted to that. Now the landlady was being her slave.

Braun couldn't restrain another wild laugh as he stared at Staang. "Why, he is a St. Bernard," he roared.

A bewildered expression covered Boone's stern face. "The irony," he gasped. "But

you're right. The dogs do lead the kind of life on Earth that would be desirable to creatures grown too lazy to even think. But to imagine that the ancestors of our dogs once built this city. It's incredible."

"Good Lord," Braun remarked. "Here we have been expecting and talking about invasions from Mars for years, and we'd already been invaded centuries ago. What a laugh they must have had."

Staang was listening in obvious amusement. "Our invasion was logical," he said. "Done in a way so as not to offend anyone. Although one creature has resented our invasion and fought us continually. It is called a flea, I believe. But the records say men have done everything possible to rid us of this pest."

"Even the great rulers of your land, who are waited on hand and foot, are servants of we Martians."

Boone raised his hand for silence. His features were crestfallen. His expedition had not uncovered what Earth would be glad to hear. "We must go," he said, but the old authority was gone from his voice.

Staang raised himself to elbows. "Wait, will you not take me with you?"

Boone paused and looked back at the shaggy figure in the gloom. He could see Staang trudging a snowy path with a keg of brandy around his neck. Almost instinctively he patted Staang on the head. "No, old boy," he said. "You stay here and put this in the record."

Braun whispered to Nance, "Evidently the Commander has a dog to whom he's not so stern."

They left Staang to his food and sleep. There was nothing of much interest on Mars except the old, old cities so long deserted.

So the great expedition departed, to go back to Earth to see the invaders—the Martians they had traveled 38,000,000 miles to see on another world. They wanted to tell Earth of the grim and incredible joke that had been played on her . . . and Nance meant to have a long talk with Mimsy.

MORLEY'S WEAPON

By D. W. BAREFOOT

Out of the far reaches of the universe sped the meteor swarm, cosmic question marks destined for annihilation in the sun. But one, approximately half a pound of frozen destruction, had a rendezvous near Japetus with Spaceboat 6.

IT WAS comfortably cool in the functional, little control room, but Morley was sweating, gently and steadily. His palms were wet, and the thin thoughtful face, shining in the glow of the instrument panel light, was wrinkled in an agony of concentration and doubt. He was trying to choose between the Scylla of waking Madsen with a corollary of biting contempt involved, and the Charybdis of attempting to land single handed on Japetus, less than five hundred miles below. Neither course was appealing.

For the hundredth time he pondered miserably over the sad condition of what had been a reasonably well ordered existence. The worst of it was that he had only himself to blame, and he knew it. No one had forced him to leave a comfortable, if poorly paid position with General Plastics, and fill out an employment card at Satellites, Inc.

He could not explain the obscure compulsion that sparked his little personal rebellion.

He didn't know, or need to know that other generations of Morleys had fought in revolutions, or sailed in square riggers, or clawed gold from mountainsides. When he went to the spaceline, the puzzlement of his few friends was profound, but hardly more so than his own. And now, after almost a year of upheaval and change, he was piloting a spaceboat along an involute curve ending on the surface of Saturn's eighth moon. And he was still puzzled.

Satellites, Inc., had done as well as possible with the raw material known as Morley, Vincent, No. 4628. His psychograph indicated a born subordinate, with a normal I.Q., reasonably stable and trustworthy

though below average in initiative. They didn't inform him of this, or the fact that they had analyzed the neurosis which had driven him to the spaceline, and which had created by that very action the therapeutic aid he needed. Many spacemen had similar case histories.

It was those who fought the compulsion who sometimes turned down dark pathways of the mind.

For six months he attended cadet school, and graduated in due time, fourteenth in a class of fifty. The next day he was assigned as fourth engineman to the space freighter *Solarian*, bound to Port Ulysses, Titan, Saturn system, with a cargo of mining machinery and supplies.

THEY blasted off from Chicago Spaceport on a raw March midnight. Just another rocket take-off, routine stuff, now. But have you ever seen it? The night, the wind, the distant city glow in the sky? On the strip squats the massive bulk of the rocket, loading hatches closed, sealed port holes gleaming through the gusts of rain that sweep the field. In the sound proofed spaceport control tower the officials are relaxed over coffee and cigarettes; their part is over; they sit watching.

Somewhere in the mighty shell on the field, chronometer hands reach the calculated second, a circuit closes, relays chatter briefly. The rocket igniters are firing, flame billows over the field, a low rumble from the tubes builds to a throbbing roar. Twenty miles away a housewife looks up, a question on her face. Her husband listens and smiles. "It's the Saturn rocket. It's here in the paper, under Departures."

On the field the roar rises to an insane



bellow of sound. Under the mighty jets, the ten feet of concrete and the solid earth beneath it are shaking. In the insulated control tower a water glass dances in its holder. The watchers are not relaxed now; they lean forward.

It's old stuff, routine, precalculated to a fraction of a second, but—watch. There—a stir—movement. Slowly at first, with a deliberate and awful majesty, then faster and faster.

Straight toward the zenith the ship rises, trailing fire. Faster yet, hurling herself upward, under full power, through the last threads of atmosphere. Upward and onward, out past Roches limit, out where gravity dwindles toward zero, into the empty-
rean where the shades of dead spacemen cruise the cosmos in their phantom craft, spaceborne in the night.

After he had recovered from the pangs of his initial attack of space nausea, Morley enjoyed himself. He had one minor social asset, a retentive mind, well stocked with general information. If the two apprentices got involved in an argument over the identity of the highest peak in America, Morley was the inevitable arbiter. He could with equal facility name the author of a recent best seller, or inform you that a young seal was a cub, a young hare, a leveret, and a young swan, a cygnet.

He was fairly popular with the crew, except for a big Norwegian from New York, named Olaf Madsen. Madsen was a chunky, hard bitten veteran of the spaceways. Round faced, deceptively soft spoken, he had a penchant for practical jokes, and a flair for biting sarcasm which found full expression in the presence of any first tripper. He made the life of any apprentice miserable, and finished the last two weeks of one trip in the brig for panicking an entire crew by painting his face to resemble the onset of Martian blue fever. Morley considered him an oaf, and he considered Morley a human filing cabinet with a weak stomach.

A little notice on the bulletin board was Morley's first inkling that his safe, secure routine was on the verge of mutating into something frighteningly unpredictable.

"All personnel not on duty will report to the recreation room at 1900 hours, Solar

time, to draw for side trip partners and destinations," it read.

He buttonholed the crew messman. "What's all this about side trips, Oscar?"

Roly poly Oscar looked at him incredulously. "The lay over trips. The time killer. On the level, don't you know?"

Morley shook his head.

"Well," Oscar told him, "We leave Earth shortly before Saturn is in opposition. They figure on the shortest possible run, which takes three months. If we discharge and start right back, the round trip would take about six months. That's fine, except that the synodic period for Earth and Saturn—Hey, you know what I'm talking about?"

Morley admitted his ignorance, vaguely annoyed at the fact that for once he was the humble seeker for information, and someone else was being professorial.

Oscar grinned. "And you studied astrogation! Well, when Saturn and Earth line up with the Sun, it takes three hundred and seventy eight days before they get in the same position again. So if we got back to Earth's orbit in six months, we'd still have about a hundred and eighty millions of miles to go, because Earth would be on Sol's other side at that time, in superior conjunction to Uranus."

Morley digested this, while Oscar basked in the light of his own knowledge, enjoying himself hugely.

"And the trips, Oscar?"

"We lay over three or four months, 'til opposition time isn't too far away, and we pick partners and destinations by lot, and go out to Saturn's other moons on prospecting trips—ore deposits, jewels, botanical specimens, etc.—half for us, and half for the Company. It's a good deal, a regular vacation, and those two-men craft are sweet stuff. And if you're lucky—"

He went on, but Morley heard no more. The prospect unnerved him. He was terrified at the idea of changing a safe subordinate position for that of an active partner, however temporary the arrangement might be. At the drawing, his hunch of impending misery proved all too real. He wound up facing the prospect of a stay on the frozen hell of Phoebe, scouring the miniature mountains for Japori crystals, with Madsen, MADSEN! for his only companion.

A WEEK later the Solarian teetered down to a landing at Port Ulysses. With various expressions of profane and unbounded delight from her crew, she was turned over to the stevedores and the maintenance gang. Thereafter, at intervals, the thirty foot space boats took off for Mimas, Tethys, Dione, or whatever waystop the lottery had decreed. Madsen and Morley left on the fourth 'night,' with Phoebe hardly a week's run from them at ten miles a second.

Madsen was at the controls. Without a single spoken word on the subject, he was automatically the captain, and Morley, the crew. The situation crystallized twenty-four hours out of Port Ulysses. Morley was poring over the Ephemeris prior to taking his watch at the controls when he became aware that Madsen, red faced and breathing heavily, was peering over his shoulder.

Morley stiffened in alarm. "Is anything—" He quailed under Madsen's glare.

"Not yet, but there's liable to be if you don't smarten up." The Norwegian's blunt forefinger stabbed at the page Morley had been studying. "Phoebe, Mister, happens to be Saturn's NINTH moon. Get it? You can count, can't you?"

Morley flushed, and fumbled miserably for a reasonable excuse. There was a gleam of contempt in Madsen's eyes, but he spoke again more quietly. "I'm going to eat and catch up on some sack time. We'll be right on top of Japetus in short order. It's a known fact that the moon won't move over if you fly at it, so you better wake me up to handle the compensating!" He disappeared into the tiny galley, but his words were still audible. "It's an awful long walk back, chum, if anybody pulls a bull."

Morley swung himself into the pilot's seat, too numb with humiliation to answer. Almost an hour passed before he started the regulation checkup required by the Space Code of any ship passing within one hundred thousand miles of a planet or major satellite. Every guardian needle stood in its normal place with one exception. The craft had been running on the port fuel tanks, depleting them to the point where it seemed wise to trim ship. Morley opened the valve, touched the fuel pump switch and waited, nothing happened. He watched the needles

incredulously. The pump—? He jabbed the switch, once, twice. Nothing.

He leaned forward and rapped the starboard gauge with his knuckles, sharply. The needle swung from Full to Empty. Morley felt faint as realization hit him. The starboard gauge had stuck at Full, and had been unreported. The tank had not been serviced in port, owing to the faulty reading and a mechanic's carelessness. They had about two hours fuel. Even to Morley, it was obvious that there was one thing only to do—land on Japetus, looming up larger in the viewplate with each passing moment. He checked the distance rapidly, punched the calculator, and put the ship in the designated orbit. He wanted to handle the landing himself, but the thought of the final few ticklish moments chilled him. So did the thought of waking Madsen, and asking him to take over.

And it was then, at the intersection of two courses formed by an infinity of variables, that two objects arrived in the same millisecond of time. Eight ounces of nickel iron smashed into the stern of Spaceboat 6, ripped a path of ruin through her entire length, and went out through the two inch glass of her bow, before Morley could turn his head. He was aware, in a strange dream-like way, of actuating the midships airtight door, of the hiss of air as the little aneroid automatically opened valves to compensate for the drop in pressure, and of Madsen leaping into the control room and slapping a Johnson patch over the hole in the bow.

Madsen was white but composed. "We can slow her down but we can't land her. Get suits while I take over. We'll ride as far as we can, and walk the rest of the way." He fought with the controls, as Morley, still bemused, obeyed. At twenty-five hundred feet they bailed out, and floating down seconds later, watched Spaceboat 6 crash into a low wooded hill. And when they landed, and inspected the wreckage, it was some minutes before either spoke.

It was obvious at a glance that Spaceboat 6 was ready for the boneyard, had there been one around. The ship, under the few automatic controls that were still functioning, had sliced in at a thirty degree angle, ploughed a short distance through a growth of slim, poplar-like trees, and then crumpled

completely against an outcropping granite ledge. Finally Morley gulped audibly, and Madsen laughed.

"Well, Mastermind, any suggestions that might help us? Any little pearls of wisdom from the great brain?"

"Just one," Morley answered. "Head for the Equator, and—"

"And try to find a D.D. Correct. If we last that long. Let's salvage what we can out of this junk and shove off."

Morley cleared his throat diffidently. "There are a few pieces of equipment we should take along, for—er—emergencies—" His voice trailed off miserably under Madsen's basilisk stare.

"Listen, Morley, once and for all. We're lugging essentials and that's all. Any extra weight is out."

"But, listen—"

Madsen ignored the interruption, and cut loose with one last broadside. "Save your breath. It's bad enough being saddled with a useless little squirt like you, without being made into a pack mule unnecessarily."

II

HE CLIMBED into a gaping hole in the bow. Morley followed, humiliated but still thinking hard. Catalogue it, he told himself. Remember everything. The Distress Depots, or D.D.'s, as spacemen called them, were studded on every frontier world, usually on the Equator. They contained two small spacecraft plus ample supplies of food, medicine, and tools. When wrecked, get to a D.D. and live. It was that simple.

They spent an hour worming their way through the shambles that had been the well ordered interior of Spaceboat 6, before emerging to take stock of their loot on the ground outside. Both men knew that they were pitifully equipped to cover several hundred miles, on foot, in a completely hostile environment. Suddenly Madsen looked up from the sextant he was examining.

"How come this gravity, Brain? I weigh about a hundred right now, I figure, and that's too much, by plenty. Japetus isn't a quarter the size of our moon."

"It's supposed to have a core of heavy radioactive metals," said Morley, thought-

fully, "and a corresponding high density. Keeps it warm anyway, instead of a big icicle, like Phoebe."

"Phoebe!" Madsen laughed. "I remember, back in '89—" He stopped abruptly at a rattling from the ledge. A green, little lizard-like creature was scrambling frantically over the granite, while hot in pursuit were three—spiders? Black, they were, a black like living velvet, and incredibly fast as they closed in, beady stalked eyes fastened on their prey. They were deliberately herding the desperate lizard toward a cleft in the rock. As the creature leaped into the opening, another spider dove at it from the recess. The others closed in. There was a hopeless hissing, a vicious clicking of mandibles. The struggle subsided. Once again the day was silent. Madsen holstered the blaster he had drawn and looked whitely at Morley.

"Pleasant pets," he grunted.

"Poisonous and carnivorous, too," said Morley, shakingly. "I remember reading that Valdez dissected one when he first landed here twenty years ago. One of his crew was bitten, and died in less than five minutes."

Madsen was thoughtful. "We could stand a little briefing on the local flora and fauna, but palaver won't get us to the Equator. And that little stock treatise entitled 'Physical Attributes of Phoebe' is worse than useless. Lucky the sextant is O.K., we can at least check our latitude. There's just one flaw."

"What's that?"

"Which way do we go when we hit the line? The D.D.'s are spaced ninety degrees apart. We might be within a hundred miles of one. If we head the wrong way, we'd have three or four hundred miles to go. There's no method of figuring our longitude."

Morley was staring sunward, with thoughtful eyes. "Yes, there is," he said quietly.

Madsen's jaw dropped. "Give," he said.

"We both forgot something we know perfectly well. Notice the sun? It hasn't moved perceptibly since we landed. Japetus doesn't revolve on its axis."

"So what?"

"Two things. One, no night, since we're on the sunward side. The sun will move

from side to side in the sky, reaching its lateral limits when *Japetus* is in quadrature in regard to Saturn. If we were here for a month, we'd see Saturn rise, make a full arc through the sky, and set. Let's hope for a shorter stay."

"Go on," said Madsen, and suddenly there was nothing patronizing or scornful in his voice.

"Two. We came in over the Pole almost exactly at inferior conjunction. Right?"

"I think I get it." Madsen answered slowly.

For a moment Morley was silent. He could almost smell the dingy classroom in Port Chicago, almost see the words on the examination paper in front of him. The paragraph leaped out, limned sharply in his mind. "Section 4, Subhead A, Solar Space Code. The initial Distress Depot on any satellite shall be situated, when practical, on the Prime Meridian. For the purposes of this act, the Prime Meridian of a satellite shall be the meridian that bisects the Sun when the Satellite is in inferior conjunction. Quarter mile belts shall be burned fifty miles to the North, South, East, and West as guides. Radio beacons will operate, unless impracticable due to atmospheric conditions, or other reasons."

"We're on, or practically on the Prime Meridian right now," said Madsen. "A trek due South should hit D.D. No. 1 square on the nose. Right?"

"Right. Two or three hundred miles to go. We might make it in two weeks."

Madsen squinted at the stationary disk of Sol, hanging in the sky. "Let's load up and get started. The sooner we're on our way, the better."

Both men had discarded their space suits, were dressed in the gray work clothes of *Satellites, Inc.* Equipment was easily divided. Each had a blaster, and a wrist compass-chronometer. Radio was useless on *Japetus*, and the little headsets were ruthlessly jettisoned. The flat tins of emergency food concentrate were stowed in two knapsacks. Madsen took charge of the sextant, and Morley carried a lightweight repeating rifle for possible game that might be out of blaster range. Canteens, a pocket first-aid kit, and a small heliograph, were the final items, except for several articles which Mor-

ley unobtrusively stowed away about his person.

Less than three hours after the crash, the two men shouldered their burdens, took a bearing to determine their course, and headed into the south.

IN A MATTER of minutes Spaceboat 6 was out of sight. With Madsen leading, they threaded their way through the scant undergrowth. Underfoot the dry, broad-bladed grass rustled through a morning that had no beginning or end. Farther away were other and less easily explained rustlings, and once both men froze as a half-dozen of what looked like baby dragons arrowed past within yards of them.

"Formation flying, like ducks," muttered Morley, watching from the corner of his eye.

When the whispering of scaled wings had died away, the castaways resumed their steady plodding into the south. Twice they crossed small fresh water brooks, providing a welcome opportunity to drink their fill, and replenish the canteens. The going was easy, since the footing was in fairly dense soil, and the scrub was not so thick as to provide any difficulties. After eight hours of nearly continuous travel, they reached the banks of a third stream. Here Madsen stopped, and dropped his knapsack to the ground.

"Campsite," he grunted.

"Alabama," Morley murmured.

Madsen goggled. "Are you delirious? What do you mean—Alabama?"

Morley laughed sheepishly. "Alabama means 'Here we rest,' I said it without thinking."

Madsen was grinning now. "What beats me is how you remember all that junk. I'd go nuts if I tried to clutter up my mind with a bunch of useless data. Alabama!"

"I don't have to try to remember things," Morley said thoughtfully. "If I read or hear something that seems the least bit curious or unusual, it just sticks. And sometimes it's useful."

"Such as?"

"Well, remember when Storybook ran a mile last year in 1.29? He was the first to break 1.30. Some joe that knew a lot about horses gave me an argument in a bar about

the first horse to break 1.40. He bet me ten credits it was Man o' War. I knew it was Ten Broeck, and I got an almanac and proved it."

Madsen looked up from the tin of coffee concentrate he was opening. "Hasn't anyone ever tried to win an argument by poking you one in the snoot?"

"Once or twice." Morley was almost apologetic. "But I learned judo a few years ago, just for the hell of it, so I didn't get hurt much."

"You're a whiz with the sabre, no doubt?" said Madsen dryly.

"No, I tried swordplay for a while, but gave it up. It's a little too, er—primitive for my tastes."

"Primitive!" Madsen glanced around at the alien scene and nearly choked. "I'm crossing my fingers, but what would you do if some carnivore, or a gang of those spiders suddenly appeared and started for us with evil intentions?"

"I think I'd run," said Morley simply. "It was pretty dull at General Plastic but at least the comptometers weren't man-eating."

Madsen blinked, and seeming to find expression difficult, forbore to answer.

They ate, and relaxed on the soft sod, lulled almost into a feeling of security. Not being foolhardy, however, they slept in six hour shifts. Morley stood the first watch, and slept the second. When he awoke, Madsen was tensely examining a ration tin. Jarred into instant alertness by a feeling of urgency and alarm, Morley leaped to his feet.

"Something wrong?"

Without answering, Madsen handed him the tin. It was pockmarked with inch wide patches of metallic gray fungus, from several of which liquid was seeping. There was a sharp odor of decay.

Madsen was hastily dumping the contents of the knapsacks on the ground. Morley joined him, and both men commenced scraping the clinging gray patches from the tins. All but three were perforated and ruined.

"We'll at least be traveling light from now on," Madsen said. "Any idea what this stuff is?"

"Some of that lichen, or whatever it is, was around the scene of the crash," Morley answered. "The stuff must have an affinity

for tin; probably secretes some acid that dissolves it. Only trouble is, it goes through thin steel too."

Madsen commenced repacking their effects.

"From now on, laddie, keep your eyes peeled for game, and if you see any, use that rifle. If we don't knock down some meat, and soon, we aren't going to make it. Might as well realize it right now."

"Were you ever wrecked before, Madsen?"

"Once, on Venus. Cartographic expedition."

"What happened?"

"Tubes blew and we made a forced landing. Wound up sitting in the middle of a pile of highgrade scrap."

"What did you do then?"

Madsen shouldered his knapsack and smiled condescendingly.

"Not a thing, Mr. Fix-it. We didn't have to. Since I seem to have accidentally stumbled on something new and strange to you, add this to your files. It's usual on cartographic trips of any length, for one ship to go out, while another stays at a temporary base, and keeps in constant directional radio contact. If anything happens, they come a-running. Makes it fine for us uninformed common people."

"Oh."

"Of course, this is somewhat different. If we don't get out by ourselves, whoever finds us need only say, 'X marks the spot.'"

Morley didn't bother answering. No comment was necessary. He knew as well as Madsen that whatever margin of safety they possessed had been shaved to the vanishing point.

THEY made twenty miles in a forced march, slept, ate, and then traveled again. The stunted forest grew thinner, and occasionally they crossed open spaces acres in extent. Twice they saw, in the distance, animals resembling terrestrial deer, and on the second occasion Morley tried a fruitless shot. They slept and ate again, and now the last of the rations were gone. They went on.

As they made southing, the dull sun crept higher in the sky by infinitesimal degrees. Now the going became tougher. Patches of evil looking muskeg began to

appear in the scrub, and the stunted trees themselves gradually gave way to six foot ferns. There were occasional signs that some creature had been foraging on the lush growth. When they found fresh tracks in the soft footing, Morley unlimbered the rifle, and the two men trod more softly. By that time either would have cheerfully made a meal on one of the miniature flying dragons, alive and kicking, and the thought of a juicy steak from some local herbivore was as soul stirring as the sight of Mecca to a true believer.

Both men whirled at a sudden crashing on their left. Something like a large splay footed kangaroo broke cover, and went lopping away, clearing the fern tops at every bound. In one motion Morley whipped up the rifle and fired. There was an earsplitting report, the leaper kept right on going, under forced draught, and the two castaways stared in consternation at a rifle that resembled a bundle of metallic macaroni more than it did a firearm.

Madsen spoke first. "You probably got some mud in the barrel when we stopped last time," he accused. "Look at us now."

Morley started to mumble an apology, but Madsen cut him short. "Look at us now," he repeated, with all stops out. "It was bad before, now it's practically hopeless. Our only long range gun! What do we do now if we do find game—dig pits for it?"

If a man can be said to slink without changing his position, Morley slunk. Madsen continued, double fortissimo.

"A kid of ten knows enough to keep a gun clean, but you, Mr.—Mr. Unabridged Webster in the flesh—"

He stopped, temporarily out of breath. Morley regarded him abjectly, and suddenly Madsen began to feel a little ashamed. After all, the fellow had figured out that business about the meridian.

"No use in having any post mortems," he said, with fine logic. "Throw that junk away. It's that much less to carry, anyway."

Two hours later, they plodded wearily through the last of the swamp onto higher ground. The two haggard, muddled figures that threw themselves on the dry soil to rest bore little resemblance to the men who had parachuted from Spaceboat 6 seventy-two hours before.

The slope on which they rested was tufted with small bushes. One particular type with narrow dark green leaves bore clusters of fruit like small plums, which Madsen eyed speculatively.

"Do we risk it?" he asked.

"Might as well."

Morley was completely unaware that he had just accepted the responsibility for making a decision.

"We can't afford not to risk it," he said, adding, with little show of enthusiasm, "I'll be the guinea pig."

"Take it easy, chum, Madsen countered. "We'll match for it."

They matched and Morley called it wrong. He plucked a sample of the fruit and stood regarding it like some bewhiskered Little Jack Horner. Finally he broke the thin skin with his thumbnail and gingerly conveyed a couple of drops of juice to his tongue. The taste was simultaneously oily and faintly sweet, and after a short wait he essayed a fair sized bite. Madsen was about to follow suit, when Morley motioned him to wait. The next second he was rolling on the ground, coughing and choking, while Madsen tried grimly to feed him water from a canteen.

It was no use. The throat tissues became swollen and inflamed in seconds, to the point of agony, and swallowing was totally impossible. To this was shortly added an overpowering nausea. When the retching finally stopped, Morley tried to speak, but in vain. Even the effort meant waves of pain.

Madsen watched helplessly, and when the spasms of choking finally stopped, spoke gently.

"We'll be camping right here for a while, looks like. Try to get some sleep if it slacks off any. You'll be okay in a while."

His doubts were hidden, and Morley thanked him with his eyes.

III

AS THE hours dragged on, Madsen sat quietly on guard, while the sick man tossed in uneasy slumber. The eternal day was comfortably warm, and eventually the watcher closed his eyes. Just for a moment, he thought drowsily, just for a nap. Head

pillowed on his arm, he slept. The alien hillside was very quiet. He slept, dreaming of the long trip home, of Port Chicago, of beer, and girls, and a fistfull of credits.

When Madsen awoke, he knew instantly that something was out of key, that some subtle change in the surroundings had triggered a warning bell in his subconscious. Without any sudden move, he cast an all inclusive glance over the surrounding terrain. Morley still slept, and the scene seemed unchanged. But no! Wait! There on the fitful breeze that had sprung up, that faint sweetish smell. He sniffed, facing upwind. What the devil was it? Frowning, he stared toward the crest of the hill. There was one tree, a few rods away, that seemed different from the others. Larger, and the branches were whiplike, drooping. It looked vaguely like a weeping willow on Earth. Madsen started toward it, walking softly. As he drew nearer, the scent became stronger, and now he recognized it. Carrion! It was coming from the tree, and he was able to see the source.

The corpses of two or three scaled green lizards, and one of the lopers from the fern forest. The drooping limbs of the tree moved undulantly in the breeze, almost as if they possessed an awareness of his approach, and he noticed that they were armed with two inch thorns. He was very close now. He took another step, and then, without warning, every nerve and muscles seemed to twist and contract violently. Blacking out between two breaths, he still realized what had happened. Once before, on Ceres, he had experienced the paralyzing effect of a blaster bolt from a weapon set at high aperture.

An hour passed. Deep down in the blackness, in the solid dark, some wisp of consciousness stirred and quickened. It quested, as the black became gray. It flowered into life, Ego once again, suddenly aware of the pale warm sunlight, and an intolerable aching. He looked up at Morley and cursed.

"Why did you do it?"

"Had to." Morley's voice was a harsh whisper. "You'd have been a goner in another step or two, and I couldn't yell. That tree's deadly."

"So that's it." A pause. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you know?"

"Remembered it from a picture in Valdez' book, when I saw you walking into that—thing! Watch this."

He picked up a chunk of shale, and lobbed it into the tree. The reaction was violent and immediate. The formerly quiescent limbs whipped sinuously through the air, their thorny armament glinting in the light. Madsen felt the back of his neck tingle at the hiss of their passage. Dozens of black, hornet-like insects took wing, and buzzed angrily and aimlessly around until the agitated motion subsided and the tree sank slowly into its former somnolence.

"How does it work?" asked Madsen.

"The thorns, they're almost instantly lethal. Notice those wasps, or whatever they are?"

"Yeah."

"Well, they live in those trees, and pollenate them. They lay eggs in the game that the tree polishes off. When the larvae graduate and get their wings, they make a brief nuptial flight, and set up housekeeping in a similar tree. Other insects stay away. It's a beautiful case of highly specialized symbiosis."

"Funny, eh?"

"Not very. You might say our position is similar, to a degree. How are you feeling now?"

"A lot better, except for the ache. Your throat seems to be coming along all right, too." His eyes ranged the slope, estimating the distance to their initial resting place. "Man alive, I was lucky to be in range!"

"You were at that, Madsen. There's just one chronic bug in energy weapons, the old law of inverse squares. Short range tools, that's all."

"You said it, Say, Morley—"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't a symbiotic relationship usually refer to some type of parasitism? Sort of a put and take game, with one organism doing all the putting, and the other, all the taking?"

Can it be? thought Morley, incredulously. Honest gratitude was natural, but the idea that Madsen's granite exterior might conceal a slowly burgeoning respect—!

"Not exactly," he said carefully. "Often there is a mutual dependence, as with us. That's what I meant to say in the first place."

"Thanks. I feel, well, pretty foolish about being so careless, and holding us up. Not that I'd have gone on walking into that tree, mind you. And I'd hate to have you think of me as a human—liana, or remora, or something."

"Don't be silly. We're partners, aren't we?"

"Yeah, that's true. Morley, I—"

"Well?"

"Thanks, a lot."

"Er—that's all right. Skip it."

THE mesa stretched to the horizon on all sides, timeless and forbidding, drowsing through the sunlit millennia. To a casual celestial voyager, it would have appeared barren of life, except for the two scarecrow figures which scabbled in the sand in spots where a stunted, ropy vine was growing. At intervals one or the other would triumphantly dig out a baseball-sized melon like object, and wolf it hungrily, the juice dribbling over his bearded chin. The trail they had made was blurred in spots where they had fallen, light-headed with weakness. The melons helped, though their caloric count would never constitute a dietitian's dream of joy. They were food, of a sort, and more important, water. Finally one of the figures scrambled to his feet, and stared defiantly at the dim sun, higher now, but still far from the zenith.

"Let's get going," said Morley thickly.

The two men shambled silently through the knee-high grass and dwarf trees of the savannah. They didn't feel particularly hungry anymore. There was only a vaguely irritating condition of lassitude, and dizziness, and an annoying tendency of the knees to buckle uncontrollably without the slightest warning. They plodded on, weaving uncertainly from time to time. There was game here, creatures like antelope, but they madedly stayed well out of blaster range. Madsen had discarded everything but his pack, while Morley's weapon still hung at his hip. With seemingly irrational stubbornness, he also clung to the impedimenta he had picked up at the wreck, despite Madsen's petulant remarks about excess weight.

It seemed to Morley as if they had been traveling forever through some grassy Gehenna. It grew harder and harder for him

to think in logical sequence. When he climbed painfully to his feet after a fall, he had to fight back a sudden overwhelming urge to burst into babyish tears. Madsen hardly ever fell down. It didn't seem fair, and he wished bitterly that he were more like Madsen. Still he fought on without knowing why. Another step, and another, and a thousand more, each one an individual effort to which he forced his failing muscles.

Another eternity or two passed, and suddenly Madsen staggered and sat down in his tracks. He stared resentfully at his knapsack and then peered up at Morley.

"We've still got four of those melon things. If we eat them now, we won't have to carry them. How about it?" he mumbled.

Through Morley's weariness crept a doubt as to the validity of his comrade's logic, but it seemed to be too difficult to analyze at the moment.

They ate the scanty meal in silence, and rested for an hour, half comatose. Then, somewhat refreshed, Morley levered himself slowly erect. He stirred Madsen with his toe.

"Up and at 'em, chum."

Madsen blinked at him and started to rise. He was on one knee, when suddenly, he turned his head in a listening attitude. Morley had heard the distant hum, too, and was standing stock still, an anxious frown on his gaunt face. Madsen was on the verge of scrambling to his feet, when Morley spoke.

"Don't move."

"What's the—?"

"Shut up, for God's sake. Don't stir." He was trembling, his bony features white as paper under their coating of grime. Madsen froze, wordless. Sailing through the tall grass, straight toward them, came one of the gray antelope-like creatures. It passed within twenty feet. They could see the heaving flanks, the foam on its muzzle, the rolling, terror stricken eyes. Close behind, and closing in rapidly, came the origin of the hum. It was a host of tiny iridescent flying creatures, no larger than bumblebees. They streaked by, green and crimson winged gems, the hum rising to a vicious crescendo.

The chase ended a hundred yards away. As the cloud struck, the antelope screamed, a lone cry of agony and despair. It staggered

once, tried to leap forward, staggered again, was down. There was a threshing, a violent movement of the grass, then silence.

IV

A QUARTER of an hour passed before a rising hum announced the ending of the feast. The component parts of the cloud took flight, coalesced into a group, vanished into the distance.

Madsen broke first, heading for the remains of the antelope, with Morley close behind. The animal lay in a heap, drained of every drop of blood, its punctured eyes staring sightlessly at the empty heavens.

"Meat," babbled Madsen. "Chops, steak, liver, heart."

"Shut up," Morley said curtly, "and start a fire." He bent to the butchering.

They ate, new life flooding into them. They were suddenly deeply conscious of the incredible sensation of being fed, of resting with a full stomach, of enjoying a reprieve that might be a pardon.

Madsen stopped picking his teeth for a moment.

"Did you know what those things were?" he asked.

"Sure. Sangres, Valdez called them. Means bloody in Spanish. They're blood drinkers. There's one thing, though, you're pretty safe if you don't move. Those sweet little birds—and they are birds, as a matter of fact—hunt by sight."

Madsen was silent. Then he laughed, and turned to eye the remains of the antelope fondly.

"And to think we didn't even have to bleed it," he said. "When we get back, you might recommend some books for me to read, if you feel like doing a good turn."

Morley was laughing, too. "It's a deal."

When they resumed their trek, both knapsacks were loaded with meat, cut into strips, and well smoked. The travelers were staggering no longer, though once again they were traversing rising ground. An eight-hour march brought them to the summit. At their feet the ground fell away in a sharp slope, to level off a few miles in the distance, and there, flowing from the west and swinging in a broad arc directly into the south, was the silvery sheen of a river. It seemed like

a great question mark, its ends disappearing over the deceptively close horizons of the little world.

Madsen peered at the bright interrogative streak.

"Pardon my ignorance, pal, but is that river really flowing south, or am I dreaming?"

"No, it's not a dream. We've been coming over a watershed evidently."

"That should simplify matters. We get to the river, build a raft somehow, if there's timber, and travel in luxury. Right?"

"Right."

A few hours of easy travel brought them to the bank. For some time it had been evident that there would be ample material for a raft. Now Morley looked at the foot-thick trunks around them, and said thoughtfully, "We'll have to work downstream and look for windfalls or something. We aren't equipped for lumberjack work."

They had paralleled the stream for some time when suddenly Madsen shouted in exultation.

"Look!"

They were standing at a point of land at a juncture of the river and an evil looking backwater some twenty feet wide. It was bridged by one fallen trunk, and on the other side were several more, where a falling giant had brought down his neighbors in his collapse.

Madsen hastily started across the trunk which bridged the slough, ignoring Morley's admonition to take it easy. Halfway across, a rotten piece of bark crumbled under his tread. He caught at the stub of a limb, preventing a full length fall by a narrow margin, and wound up standing in semi-liquid, knee deep mud. He had placed his hands on the fallen trunk, preparatory to climbing back on it, when, with hardly a warning ripple, something flipped from the muddy surface and clamped around his wrist. Another slapped across his neck, and clung.

Madsen tore at them in vain, waves of revulsion flooding him. The things were inch-thick ribbons, a foot and a half long, and about six inches wide, a mottled green in color. There was an unspeakable repulsion about their touch, and they were coldly, clammily strong. Now the surface of the

slough was churning as the hideous swarm converged, and Madsen felt his strength fading as a light dims when an electrician turns a rheostat. He tried to keep fighting, but his muscles refused to answer his will. Immobile, but fully conscious, with his insides a ball of cold horror, he waited.

MEANWHILE, Morley, on solid ground, was clawing the contents from his knapsack, scattering jerky on all sides.

The tableau on the bank was within Madsen's range of vision as he lay half immersed in mud, with the stomach-turning horrors greedily glueing themselves to his exposed hands and face. To the sick helplessness with which he faced the end, was added a hopeless burning rage. What was Morley doing? Planning to offer the things some dried meat? A handful of near-leather for something that lusted and craved for hot blood? What a way to cash in. A living buffet dinner for alien monstrosities, while a white faced weak sister fumbled frantically, safely, in a useless knapsack. A band of cold, hungry malignance fastened itself to his forehead, just missing his left eye.

Dully, he watched Morley come up with something like a small flashlight, saw him thumb the switch, and commence crawling out on the log to where Madsen lay half submerged. Once within range, he played the invisible beam from the little device over Madsen's inert body. The result was instantaneous. The giant leeches relaxed their grip and disappeared under the mud with startling rapidity. Morley retched at a glimpse of a sucker-lined underbelly. Then he hooked his weapon on his belt and dragged Madsen to dry land.

The victim's frantic eyes showed he was obviously conscious, though unable to move or speak. Morley promptly launched into a reassuring monologue.

"Don't worry, you'll be O.K. in a few hours. Those things temporarily short circuit the nervous energy of their prey in some manner. They call them sanguisuga, means bloodsucker. They're sensitive only to strong ultraviolet, like a lot of extra-terrestrial life."

He removed the little projector from his belt.

"That's why I've been lugging this airlock disinfectant all the way. I had a hunch it might come in handy. And look."

He unbuttoned his shirt, exposing a length of thin cord coiled around his waist.

"I wasn't going to show you this, but now we can use it for lashings for the raft we're going to build as soon as you're better."

"Even a rope," said Madsen slowly. He articulated with difficulty, his nerves tingling with returning life.

Forty-eight hours later they were far to the South, floating down the nameless river on their improvised raft. There was no feeling of captain and crew, now. Just two men, fighting together. And winning.

The sextant had long since been discarded, and both men were staring at a rickety tripod, from which a button was suspended by a piece of ravelled thread. The shadow it cast was a dark dot. Madsen spoke first.

"You're quite a gadgeteer, aren't you. It's simple, at that. The closer we are to the equator, the higher the sun, and the shorter the shadow. Voila!"

Morley laughed and stretched. The change in equilibrium set the little pendulum to swinging gently, and he watched it intently as the motion slowly ceased.

"It's been that way for hours now. We should be nearly there."

Madsen scanned the bank. "Any time now, any time."

An hour later they saw it. A quarter mile lane burned through the trees and shrubs, running straight as a string from the horizon to the river, and continuing on the other side. They beached the raft, in case the necessity arose to cross back, and trudged until they came to the first mile marker. They were on the right side. The arrow pointed in the direction they were going, and the enamelled sign said, simply,

JAPETUS D.D. No. 1
12 m.
19 km.

After a pause, Madsen spoke. "We made it, thanks to what you knew about Japetus. All those little things that added up."

"Oh those," said Morley. "Just," he hesitated. "Just—odds and ends."

THE PURPLE PARIAH

By BYRON TUSTIN

It was round and purple and awfully, awfully sad. And it told the most melancholy story Archie Simms had ever heard. Yup, 'twas a real million-year tragedy, this tale of the purple pariah.

THE rocket ship whirled down from the sky and crashed into the hillside. A cloud of dust rose lazily from the spot and mingled with the white fumes escaping from the vessel.

The escape hatch opened and Archie Simms jumped down to the surface of the planet.

"Oh-oh, Ed—here's the welcoming committee!" he yelled. Ed Bailey's face appeared in the doorway.

The two men stared grimly at a motionless purple sphere, about eight feet in diameter, that rested fifty feet from the damaged rocket. On the surface of the sphere were two huge, sad eyes that watched the rocket ship with melancholy attention.

"What is it?" asked Ed Bailey.

"Damned if I know," snorted Archie Simms. He ambled toward the purple sphere. "Shoo," he said. "Go on, get out of here. Shoo!" The purple sphere did not move, but its two huge eyes regarded him sadly.

"Hey, don't get too close to it."

"Don't worry." Archie procured a rock from the ground and hurled it at the purple sphere. He missed; the eyes of the sphere contemplated him even more sadly. The sphere did not move.

"Should I fire the cannon at it?" queried Ed.

"Leave it alone. It just wants to sit there and watch us." He walked up to the purple sphere and examined it closely. He petted it between its two huge eyes and it looked at him sadly.

Ed jumped down from the ship with a large book under one arm. He paged hurriedly through it. Archie ran his hand gently over the purple sphere's fur. The purple

sphere eyed him sadly.

"Here's where we are," said Ed. "That meteor rammed us just as we came to Sector QMA. That star up there's XTM-L-48935; we're on the eighth planet. Says here the place was explored twenty years ago: No life on it."

"Wonder how they missed this fellow," commented Archie, stroking the sphere sympathetically. The sphere looked at him with great, sad eyes.

"Incompetent bastards," Ed remarked pleasantly. "That's the racket we should be in, Arch:—space exploring. You get lots of money and you don't do any work. Why, I've heard stories—"

"Let's see about it when we get back," suggested Archie.

"Funny, though;—here's this thing waiting for us as soon as we smash. They must've been blind drunk when they explored this place. Or else purple there's come since."

"Maybe that's it."

"I'll check." He rifled through some more pages. "This damn index is alphabetical. Maybe it's from another planet and just visiting."

"Who knows?"

"What do you think they'll call it in here?"

"I can't ever find anything in that damn catalogue. Try under spheres: Purple spheres."

"Mmmm." He concentrated on the index. "'Parallelopipeds' . . . 'pseudospheres' . . . 'rhombi' . . . 'segmented objects' . . . here it is: 'Spheres.' They've got a lot of spheres here! All sorts of 'em. We've got to go by color. You think he's purple?"

"Sort of purple."



"Here's something violet: 'Spheres, violet, Fire-breathing mammal of Planet III, TRP-U-44476, Sector LKW. Approximately three feet in diameter. Females frequently found with yellow polka dots on underside.' "

"Try again. Melancholy here's three times that big." He stooped down and gazed up at the purple sphere from underneath. "Uh-uh, no yellow polka dots either." The purple sphere looked down at him with sad eyes.

"What's ochre?" asked Ed Bailey.

"God knows!"

"Is this thing ochre?"

"God knows that too, Bailey." He turned abruptly to the purple sphere: "Are you ochre?" The purple sphere looked at him sadly.

"Cut the clowning," rasped Ed. "Here's an index. 'Ochre:—pale yellow.' "

"You learn something every day."

"Here's a good bet: 'Spheres, Fuchsia.' Would you call it Fuchsia?"

"I guess he's pretty Fuchsia."

"**'SPHERES, Fuchsia:** Most common S shape and color of Chameleon Tiger of Planet IV, YAP-A-90909, Sector WKM. Reptile; can assume any geometrical shape and/or color. Is carnivorous, and exceedingly dangerous. Approximately eight feet in diameter.' "

"More like it! This boy must be their great-granddaddy. He doesn't look dangerous: Maybe he's senile."

"You'd better get away. It might chew off your head any minute. I'll bet you that's what it is: A 'Chameleon Tiger.' "

"When we get the boat fixed, let's take him back to—what is it?"

"YAP-A-90909, Sector WKM."

"Maybe somebody'll hand us a reward. What say, boy?—you, there, with the big eyes—what say to going home?" The purple sphere looked at him with sad eyes.

"There any other spheres in there, Ed?"

"No more purple babies. This must be him. I wish it'd change into a green cube, so we'd get positive identification. Tell it to change into a green cube."

"Hey, boy, can you change into a green cube?" Archie asked. The purple sphere regarded him sadly. "Ed, throw me that old canteen." The canteen was thrown down. "N-w look, boy." He carefully drew a circle

and a square in the sand. "See this? This is a sphere. That's you, get it?" He pointed to the circle, then to the purple sphere. "This is a cube, see?" He indicated the square. "Now, we want you to change into a cube; get it? A green cube." The purple sphere blinked its great eyes and continued to stare at Archie sadly.

"It's an idiot," cried Ed Bailey. "Let me shoot it. Maybe we can make a stew out of it."

"Leave it alone. We can't kill it—not with those big eyes. We ought to take it back to earth and slap it in a zoo."

"We ought to shoot it. Maybe it's got some playmates around here. Archie, you got no business petting big purple balls. Remember what happened when you started fooling around with that orange thing back on LTX-R-76—whatever it was?"

"He didn't have any eyes, Ed. Look at this thing's eyes: It couldn't hurt us; it just wants to watch. I think we should—"

His words were drowned by a frightful noise and a terrible shock. The sky went dark.

"Damn unpleasant sunsets they got around here," yawned Ed nonchalantly.

Archie picked himself up from the dust. "What sort of a crazy planet are you muggs running here?" He shook his fist at the purple sphere. "Hey—hey, Ed—look! It glows in the dark!" The sphere's purple fur emitted rich violet light, and its great eyes shone bright white around their jet black pupils. They looked sadly at Archie. Ed lit a cigarette.

"So do lots of things. It makes a better target this way. I think we ought to have it for breakfast tomorrow. We got a lot of work to do, and I'm sick of beans."

"You let it alone, Bailey, or I'll smash you."

"I was just kidding. You can keep it." He yawned viciously. "I'm turning in. If you want to stick around with Fido all night, hop to it. I'm closing this hatch and getting as far away as I can."

He threw down his cigarette. "Coming?"

Archie petted the sphere tenderly, then ambled leisurely to the ship. "Coming. Not that I don't trust Melancholy, but there might be something else crawling around out there. Help me up."

Ed held out his arms and assisted his comrade aboard the ruined rocket ship. They shut the hatch behind them.

All night the purple sphere glowed in the dark, watching the ship with great, sad, luminescent eyes.

ANOTHER frightful noise and its concomitant shock hurled Archie violently out of his bunk. "God-awful planet," he muttered as he climbed off of Ed Bailey. "How's that old song go? 'Where the sun comes up like thunder from—'"

"You got better things to do than sing. Let's get going. I'll check the engine and you see if you can't fix the radio."

Archie yawned loudly and opened the escape hatch. "Hey, Ed, Melancholy's still out here!"

"Fix that radio, damn you!" shouted Ed from the recesses of the ship.

Archie sat diligently in the open hatchway and tried to fix the radio. Frequently he addressed comments to the purple sphere and the purple sphere gazed at him with its sad eyes.

The morning passed but the radio did not heal. At eleven o'clock Archie grabbed two hot wires and shouted in anguish. Rising to his feet, he kicked the radio savagely out the open hatch. It crashed against the ground and slid toward the purple sphere. The purple sphere looked up at Archie sadly.

Archie hurled a wrench at it and the purple sphere winced. "Stop looking at me like that!" shouted Archie. "Fix it yourself, damn you!"

The purple sphere sidled forward and sat on top of the radio. The radio disappeared from view.

"Hey, Ed! Ed!" called Archie. "It just ate our radio!"

Ed hurried up from the back of the ship. "You ass," he said. "Why did you let him have it? I should bash your teeth in." He brandished a hammer threateningly.

"Let's not lose our tempers, Ed," smiled Archie anxiously.

"Okay. Forget it. We'll never get out of here by fighting." He stepped resolutely into the cabin and returned with an ugly looking steel tube. "I'm going to roast Fido right off that radio."

"Hey, wait a minute, Ed!" Archie held

his comrade's arm. "—After all, I gave him the radio. Maybe he thought I'm trying to make friends."

"You blockhead! I ought to turn Betsy here on you. What were you up to—feeling sorry for monstrous there? Okay . . . you get the radio back your way. Spend all month doing it! Just sit looking into handsome's limpid pools and maybe she'll kiss you and give you back your radio. Damn 'Chameleon Tiger!'"

He brandished his hammer aloft and returned to the nether regions.

SEVERAL minutes later the purple sphere sidled backward and the radio returned to view. It emitted curious noises. The purple sphere looked up at Archie sadly.

"You fixed it?" cried the amazed Simms. "Ed! Ed! Come here! He fixed it! It works!" Ed returned to stare at the radio in disbelief.

"Hey, that's pretty damn good. What about asking him to fix the rest of the ship?"

"I'll try. Hey, Melancholy! Fix up our rocket ship, okay?"

The purple sphere sidled forward until it stood directly beneath the escape hatch. Then it looked up at Archie.

"It wants to get in," explained Archie. "Do we still have that old ramp I stole on Mercury?"

"Right here."

Together they lowered the ramp. The purple sphere sidled forward and vainly attempted to climb upward.

"He's too heavy," said Simms. "We'll have to jump down and push him."

"Don't like," said the cautious Bailey. "Then he's on and we're off. That's too much like suicide."

"We can trust him. He fixed the radio, didn't he?"

"All right, wise guy. It's your funeral, too." They hopped down and, straining mightily, pushed the purple sphere to the top of the ramp.

"Will he go through the hatch?" cried Ed. "I can't see around him."

"Hope so," panted Archie, "or he's going to roll back on top of us. There he goes. We made it!"

The purple sphere vanished into the ship.

"What do we do now?" cried the excitable Bailey. "He may curl up and hibernate

in there, for all you know. If he's not out in an hour, I'm going to shoot him!"

The odor of hot metal drifted out the emergency hatch. "He's schmooling around in there," said Ed.

"Leave him alone, Ed. Let's look around," Ed grumbled, but followed the retreating form of Archie Simms. They had strayed over a mile from the ship when the sun blasted out the end of another day.

"We'd better head back," said the cautious Bailey, turning around.

"Okay, but not that way. The ship's over there."

"Nuts, Arch; the ship's that way."

"Who you trying to fool? Don't you think I know what way we came?"

"You fathead," snorted Bailey, gripping his ugly looking steel tube more tightly. "I might've known you'd get us lost! You and your 'Chameleon Tiger!' Damn both of you!"

"Oh, shut up. We aren't going to get back by shouting. Let's start walking your way and see what happens."

Time passed.

"Well," admitted the chagrined Ed Bailey, six hours later, "maybe you're right."

"We're good and lost now," replied Arch. "Probably can't even find the ship in the day, now. She's down in one of those sand valleys and we've passed millions of 'em."

"I wouldn't care if you hadn't parked that monster inside. Maybe he's eating our boat. I saw some metal eating things in the catalogue."

"Said he's carnivorous, Ed."

"Also said he could change to a cube. Oh, damn the whole stinking mess. You and your little friends."

"Wait till morning. Maybe we'll find our way."

"Oh, sure," said Ed bitterly.

The intrepid spacemen sat sadly down on a big stone and gazed up at the night sky.

"Funny constellations," proclaimed Ed angrily.

"Look there," said Archie, pointing. "Northern lights."

"Northern lights, hell!" cried Ed. "They don't move like that. It's something behind that hill—and it's coming!" He placed the steel tube to his shoulder. "I'll take ten of 'em with me," he grated.

A luminescent purple sphere appeared atop the hill.

"It's the marines!" shouted Archie, knocking down the barrel of Ed's gun. "Smell? I can smell it from here—hot metal! It's Melancholy, come to rescue us!"

"Or to eat us! I'll take care of him!"

"You fool! Give me that!" The two men grappled for possession of the gun. The purple sphere stopped and watched them sadly. Finally Archie obtained the weapon and angrily tore it apart. He threw the parts as far as he could, then turned furiously on Ed.

"Mel here's our only friend in the world. He hasn't tricked us yet and we've got to lay all our dough on him. Now get up." Ed rose groggily to his feet. "Take us back to the ship," Archie commanded the purple sphere. The purple sphere sidled off and they followed it.

Dawn literally broke as they topped a rise and looked down once again on the rocket ship. The polished fuselage, so grotesquely twisted the day before, was now smooth. The ship rested on the side of the hill, her prow aimed at the sky.

"I'll be damned," snorted Ed Bailey. "He's done it. Let's get out of here quick."

"See if it works."

They climbed aboard. Before he shut the emergency hatch, Archie looked down into the sad eyes of the purple sphere. The purple sphere had never looked sadder, he decided. Then he shut the hatch.

"D'you think maybe he's booby-trapped it to explode in the air?" wondered the suspicious Bailey.

"No."

"Well, here's nothing. Hold on." Bailey pressed a button. There followed a dull roar, a blinding flash of light, and the little rocket ship whirled up into the sky.

The purple sphere looked after it sadly. A large crystal tear welled up in each of his great, unhappy eyes and trickled slowly down his purple fur.

"THE little punk didn't cross us after all," admitted Ed Bailey grudgingly, turning momentarily from the controls.

"This is enough. It's in better shape than when we bought it," testified Archie.

"Okay. Set a course out of this Sector, and

we'll hit the road."

"Wait a second: We've got to go back there and thank Melancholy."

"WHAT did you say? THANK it? Why? It won't understand. It'll just stand there with those idiotic eyes and moon at you."

"If it's smart enough to fix our ship, it's worth thanking," proclaimed Archie.

"Well," grumbled Ed, "maybe you're right. We'd still be rotting here if it weren't for Fido."

"Maybe we can even take him aboard and lug him back to YAP, or wherever he's from. He must be awful lonely here."

"Over my dead body. He'd take too much weight. And I don't want to get mixed up with any more Chameleon Tigers. They might not all have such nice, sad eyes. If we bring Fido on here, we drop him off at the nearest zoo. I won't go near YAP. One Fido's enough."

"We ought to do something for him, Ed."

"Thanking him's too much. I'm not going to cart purple spheres around the galaxy. We'd be the laughing stock of the century. He stays here!"

He punched a button fiercely and swung the ship into a sharp curve. "Where'll we set? This place all looks the same."

"Just put her down," advised Arch. "I'll bet Melancholy gets there in ten minutes."

"How much?"

"Fifty."

"You're on." The ship whirled down from the sky and slid along the sand. Archie opened the escape hatch and waited. Five minutes later the purple sphere mounted a nearby rise and sidled down into the valley. It halted fifty feet from the ship and watched Archie with sad eyes.

"You lose, Ed," announced Archie.

"Damn monster," snorted Ed. "Thank it and let's get out of here."

"Aren't you going to thank it?"

"No, damn it! Me thank a big purple ball? You can thank it for both of us. Might try kicking it a few times and see whether you get any reaction."

Archie leaped down on the sand and hurried to the side of the purple sphere. The purple sphere looked at him sadly. Archie petted it between and beneath its eyes. Suddenly he stood up.

"Hey Ed! It's been crying!"

Ed snorted angrily but said nothing. "No, really, Ed! It's all wet under its eyes, here!" He petted it the more tenderly. The purple sphere looked at him sadly.

"Come on," yelled Ed. "I'm sick of this mush."

"Just a second," replied Archie. "Well—good-bye," he said to the purple sphere. "I don't know whether you get me. Do you know what I'm saying? No. Thanks anyway." He petted the purple sphere between its great eyes; the eyes watched him sadly. He cursed softly, then turned on his heel and hurried toward the rocket ship. Suddenly he pivoted again and said to the purple sphere:

"You maybe saved our lives, Mel. Anything we can do for you? Any place we can take you? Say the word and we'll do it."

The purple sphere looked at Archie sadly. Then it sidled rapidly forward, knocked Archie unceremoniously off his feet, and climbed on top of him. Archie shrieked: "Hey! Ouch! Get off! Stop him, Ed! Stop him! He's hurting me something aw—" His voice became muffled and stopped. Ed stood petrified while Archie slowly disappeared into the purple sphere. All the while, the purple sphere looked up at Ed out of sad eyes.

Then Archie was gone. Ed swore a terrible oath and possessed himself of another ugly looking steel tube. He leveled it to his shoulder and pushed a button. A terrible gaping crack appeared in one of the purple sphere's eyes and a green ichor trickled thickly out. The purple sphere rolled over and sidled away at an incredible speed. Ed fired again. He missed.

"Damn purple punk," he yelled after the retreating purple sphere. "I'll get you yet. I'll get you!"

He slammed the emergency hatch and leaped into the pilot's seat. He jockeyed the little rocket ship into the air above the strange planet. Miles away, he saw the purple sphere bowling hastily over the sand. He gained on it steadily, following as rapidly as he could. Shortly he was close enough: He sighted in an eyepiece mounted with crosshairs and saw there a greatly enlarged image of the speeding purple sphere. He threw an ugly looking steel lever. The ship rocked violently and a cloud of dust rose

from the spot where the purple sphere should have been.

"Stand still, damn you!" shouted Ed. Again he lined the purple sphere up in the crosshairs. Again he pressed the button, and again the purple sphere swerved aside in time. Ed pounded his fist desperately on the instrument panel.

"I'll kill you," he shouted; "I'll kill you! I'll kill you if it takes a year—and if I don't have you then, I'll come back with the whole damned fleet and kill you!" He threw the lever again, and again, and again.

Mr. Bailey has wounded me in the eye, Mr. Simms.

I am sorry that I hurt you, Mr. Simms, but it was the only way . . . I have understood everything that you and Mr. Bailey have thought and said, Mr. Simms, but I cannot impress my thoughts upon you until I have taken you inside me. I am sorry that it was so painful for you when I brought you inside me; I am sorry that you are unconscious; but you can understand me, now. I did not wish to hurt you, but you were so large that I had difficulty bringing you inside me.

Mr. Bailey is chasing me in the rocket ship, Mr. Simms. He is shooting at me with a terrible weapon. I know what he is thinking, so I am able to change my direction before he fires. But shortly I shall grow tired, Mr. Simms; I would not grow tired had Mr. Bailey not wounded me in the eye; but he has wounded me in the eye and I am bleeding. I must tell you what I must tell you quickly, Mr. Simms, so that you will stop Mr. Bailey from shooting at me.

I only tried to help you, Mr. Simms. I did not wish to hurt you. I saw you throw your radio away and I knew that you desired me to repair it. I repaired it; subsequently I repaired your vessel. When you and Mr. Bailey lost your way in the hills, I came to find you and I led you back to the ship. I have only tried to help you; I did not wish to hurt you.

Mr. Bailey thinks that I have eaten you and is trying to destroy me. I must explain things to you, so that you can prevent him from destroying me.

I only wanted to help you and Mr. Bailey. I know how much you need help and I

wanted to help you, because you were kind to me. I did not expect a reward; I thought merely that I would help you and that then you would leave me. At last you and Mr. Bailey climbed into your ship and left. I cried, for I had wanted to tell you about myself. But I could not tell you without hurting you and bringing you inside me. I did not wish to hurt you, and I knew that if I brought you inside me, Mr. Bailey would not understand. I would not bring Mr. Bailey inside me because he does not like me.

But you returned, and I thought that perhaps I had not repaired your ship effectively. No; I discovered that you wished to thank me for my aid. I did not expect that you would thank me; I expected that you would depart without thanking me. Why should you thank me? You did not think that I would understand. But you thanked me and then you asked me whether you could do anything for me. I saw in your mind that you were sincere: You did not only say that you wished to do something for me; you wished to do something for me. So I took you inside me, and Mr. Bailey has wounded me in the eye, and now he is following me in your rocket ship, and he is shooting at me.

You can help me, Mr. Simms. I shall tell you how you can help me and then I shall let you out.

I have lived on this planet for millions of years, Mr. Simms. In all that time I have been alone. No one had ever visited me until you came. There is no other life on this planet and I have been all alone. At times it has been more than I can bear. At times I have wished to destroy myself. But I cannot do that and I must not, for my people need me.

Many millions of years ago I lived with my people on a large planet that revolved about a large star in a galaxy that is very distant now.

I am not of this galaxy, Mr. Simms.

I was the wisest among my people. They called me the Purple Sage. I was versed in all wisdom and I knew all answers. The people came to me for knowledge and revered me as the wisest of all beings.

Several million years ago our galaxy approached your galaxy. Your galaxy was very

different then; I watched it change, these millions of years. Our galaxy approached and I perceived that the two galaxies would pass through each other.

This is a rare phenomenon, Mr. Simms, but it was undoubtedly known to your astronomers many years ago. Galaxies are nothing more than enormous vacuums, and in any one passage of two galaxies through one another, there are likely to be not more than two or three stellar collisions.

I determined that my planet was quite safe. As your galaxy approached, I determined to conduct an interesting experiment. I constructed a large space ship and planned to fly it to one of the planets of your galaxy. Then I would return to my own planet. I hoped to determine whether your galaxy was similar to mine.

My people wept at my departure and asked me what would become of them if I did not return. I told them that the officials would care for them. I thought then that I was little more than an ornament and their grief more rhetorical than sincere.

A bright star was due to pass close to our sun; I entered my space ship and steered toward it. I landed on this planet.

This is a curious planet, Mr. Simms. You have noticed the phenomenon of the sunset. The surface of the planet expands and contracts all at once, rather than doing so by slow degrees. As a result, the sun rises and sets instantly. When I arrived in my space ship, the phenomenon was much more exaggerated. I emerged from my ship and walked about the planet. I did not expect the contraction which came at sunset. It was terrible: I was thrown against a jagged pinnacle of rock and severely injured. For many centuries I could not move. Slowly I recovered. I returned to my ship. In the course of many such sunsets, it had been shattered to atoms. The delicate instruments had been ruined. I worked many years on the ship, but I could do nothing to repair it. At last I abandoned the task.

Nothing is left of it now. Millions of years have passed and its dust is mingled with the dust of this planet.

I watched my people recede from me. When I lay next to the jagged pinnacle that had wounded me, I could still see my planet in the sky. By the time that I was well, I

could discern my sun from the other stars only with difficulty.

The years have passed slowly and now my galaxy is a point of light that I can no longer resolve in the distance.

I am growing tired, Mr. Simms, and Mr. Bailey still follows me. He shoots at me no longer, but he understands that I must rest. I shall complete my tale as rapidly as I can.

I waited milleniums, but no one came. Without my aid, my people could never have built a space ship with which to rescue me. I did not have the materials. I waited alone, confident at some times that help would come, confident at most that I would remain here forever . . . alone.

Then you came, Mr. Simms. I saw immediately that your ship was damaged and I knew that it was not damaged badly. I wished to save you from my fate. I wished to repair your ship; I did not dare attempt to repair it, however; you would have thought that I was trying to hurt you and you would have destroyed me. I could only wait until a suitable opportunity presented itself.

You were very kind, Mr. Simms. You patted me between my eyes. The contact of your hand, the first contact with a living being in millions of years, drove me to distraction. I almost brought you inside me then and there, but I restrained myself. I knew that Mr. Bailey would not understand and would destroy me.

Now you have told me that you wish to help me. Mr. Simms, I wish to return to my own people. In the course of these years of exile, I have thought many thoughts that will be useful to them. And who was there to instruct them, after my departure? I wish to return to my people, Mr. Simms.

I believe that you and Mr. Bailey could return me in safety. It would require several major alterations in the design of your ship, but I have thought about such alterations for many years and I am confident that they can be made.

I do not think that you would regret the voyage. You would be feted at great length; there would be a splendid celebration in the hippodrome and you and Mr. Bailey would be seated in chairs of state. You would find it difficult to leave us. Nor would you go

unrewarded in larger coin: I would inform you of the cures to any diseases that may still plague your people and I would give you the answers to many of their ills.

I would promise your safe return; we would build a great ship for you; it would be a time machine as well as a space craft and would return you to your planet no earlier or later than you might choose. There would be another magnificent celebration to bid you farewell. No, Mr. Simms, you would not regret returning me to my people.

But let us look at the other side of the matter: It is quite possible that I shall fail. It is quite possible that we would all be destroyed in the starless vastnesses of space. I can offer you no proof of my competence except your repaired radio and your repaired vessel. And those were simple tasks.

I am very tired, Mr. Simms. I can run no longer. I must let you out. Tell Mr. Bailey what I have told you. I pray that you may decide to help me. I pray, but I do not hope. I am sorry that I hurt you; please forgive me for hurting you, if you do nothing else.

When I see Mr. Bailey descend and talk to you, I shall cease running. I shall remain where I ceased running. You and Mr. Bailey will decide what you must do. If you will not help me, then I must ask one other favor: Fly to where I am sitting and shoot your weapon at me. I shall not move. I believe that it is capable of destroying me.

ED BAILEY pressed the button again and the purple sphere swerved aside. "Lousy purple punk," he shouted.

The purple sphere stopped in its tracks and the rocket shot past it. Ed swore and swung about. He looked down. A man's body lay stretched on the sand and the purple sphere hurried away.

Ed dropped down and rushed to the side of the prostrate figure.

"I made it drop you," he sobbed over the body, "I made it drop you. My God!—you look half-digested!" He felt Archie Simms' body. "Your arm's broke!"

Archie's lips moved feverishly. "Got to—got to help it—or kill it," he groaned.

"Come on," said Ed. He lifted the wounded man to his shoulders. "You're okay

now. Don't talk. I'll get you aboard."

"It saved us—got to help it—or kill it."
"I'll make hash of it," said Ed, placing Archie on his bunk. He procured a hypodermic needle from a wall cabinet. "Sorry, Arch, I'm putting you under till we get back. I can't help you. See you in a month." He plunged the needle into Archie's arm.

"Got to—help it . . . or kill it," sobbed Archie weakly. "Got to . . . help . . . it . . ." He slept.

Ed slipped behind the controls of the rocket. He pressed a button and the little boat whirled up into the sky. It vanished rapidly into the empty distances.

On a distant hilltop sat the purple sphere. He followed the path of the retreating rocket with sad eyes. He waited for many hours. The sun set and he glowed dimly against the stars. He watched the stars sadly. Then he cried.

He cried for seven days and seven nights.

EIGHT years passed.

The rocket whirled down from the sky and crashed into the hillside. A cloud of dust rose lazily from the spot and mingled with the fumes escaping from the vessel.

Straightway the escape hatch opened and Archie Simms jumped down to the surface of the planet.

"Here he is, Ed!" he shouted back into the ship. Ed's face appeared in the doorway.

"Fido," he remarked pleasantly.

"We've come," said Archie. "It's been a long drag, but we made it."

The purple sphere's left eye was black and swollen.

"Sorry I shot you," said Ed. "I didn't know . . ." The purple sphere looked sadly up at him. Archie petted it between the eyes and pointed to the ship.

"There she is," he said. "All yours. Take care of her."

Ed eased down the ramp, then hopped to the ground. He and Archie pushed the purple sphere into the ship.

Archie nudged his partner gently. "Look, Ed, he's smiling!"

"Lousy purple punk," snorted Ed. "You know we won't get out of this mess alive, Simms. Lousy purple punk . . ."

"Oh, let's have lunch."

THE MOON AND THE SUN

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

THE rocket waited, a gleaming yellow-finned tube, pointing its nose at the depths of space. Time ticked in the control tower which rested in the shadow of the great monster. Six minutes left. Sunlight danced on silver curves.

Tick, tick, tick, tick. The time was in Charters' brain like the sound of a pendulum in a grandfather's clock. The end was nearing.

It was almost over.

Charters turned his thick wrist and looked at his watch.

Outside the sun was a strong white fire in a blue sky. Sand stretched away endlessly from the circular cluster of buildings, from which the rocket had been conceived and nurtured and born.

Seconds crept, and there was a dead silence in the tower room.

"We've done it," Charters said, his voice like a snapping of brittle wires.

Lampson, his assistant, nodded and watched the rocket. "Yes," he said.

"Greatest victory of the age!" said Charters, grinning and gaily wiping his hands together.

Lampson watched the way the sun struck the glistening silver body of the rocket.

"Have you nothing to say, man?" Charters asked.

"I was just thinking."

"This is no time to think," Charters said, his eyes bright and winking. "This is a time to let your thoughts drain out of your head. To feel the damned meaning of this thing! To let it get inside you and fill you up to the brains! This is the time to laugh and

cry, Lampson. To let your insides quiver with the pure joy of it! We've done it!"

"Yes," Lampson said. "Only I was thinking about Randall, sitting out there, waiting."

"He'll be all right."

"I know he will. I don't mean that, I mean, the way he feels about things, yet sitting there, waiting to guide it to the Moon, to prove its reality. And all the time, he—"

"He's caught in a stream, Lampson. A swift, driving stream that won't let him stop. He can't help himself."

Lampson shook his head. "I can't believe he's really going through with it."

"He's different now," Charters said. "A few months ago, he had all these ideas about the rocket being used for military reasons, for killing, and all that other nonsense. Now he's caught in the grip of this thing. He's watched his own work blossom and turn into a remarkably beautiful finished miracle."

Charters watched the rocket, eyes half-closed, seeming to feel the strength of it in his own hands as he closed them slowly, tightly.

"Ah—" he said, lips curling. "The beautiful, beautiful thing!"

Lampson watched through the thick window, unblinking. "He was right, you know."

"Who was right?"

"Randall. He was right about this rocket. We won't use it for anything but just another weapon. All this work and planning. All Randall's sweat and blood. For no

reason, but just another weapon."

"It's too late now."

"Yes. And you knew it, didn't you?" Lampson said to Charters, looking at the man. "You knew what this would mean. When Randall wanted to quit, and you finally got him to go ahead, you knew what we'd use it for."

"You don't quit after ten years." Charters looked at his watch, counting silently.

"He's been sold out," Lampson said, thinking of Randall, sitting in the rocket. "A lifetime of worry and work and prayer. Now he's been sold out."

"Damn it, man," Charters said, "it's nearly ready to happen!"

The room was silent, and the ticking was in the air again. A steady, rhythmic ticking, that got into the brain and beat time with the heart.

One minute.

The rocket rested on its launch, as though tightening its metallic muscles and cords, to spring into the air like a wild frenzied terror, to cut through the sky, through space, to touch the Moon.

"Thirty seconds," Charters said, his voice trembling.

Lampson closed his hands and his eyes.

"Twenty seconds," Charters bent his head over his watch. His breathing shortened and he waited, tensed, crouched. "Ten. Five, four, three, two . . ."

The ground shook as though a chasm had split beneath its surface! There was a streaking in the air. The rocket sped away and away.

"Over!" said Charters, his face to the sky. "It's over!"

Lampson turned from the window and stood quietly, watching the floor. His shoulders were limp, his hands still and quiet at his sides.

"By God!" said Charters, whirling, slapping his palms together. "What an entirely immense thing!" He grinned widely and moved his feet as though he were dancing.

"Randall," said Lampson, his voice a lost, dead sound.

"Randall, Randall," Charters mimicked. He moved about quickly, this way and that, waving his hands, grinning. "This is much greater than Randall!"

Lampson was silent while Charters cracked his hands together. "The Moon," Charters breathed. "The Moon!"

There was a loud shuffling outside the door then, and suddenly the door swung open and a wide-eyed man in the white coveralls stood, staring at Charters.

"What's the matter?" said Charters, freezing.

"I can't believe it," said the man. "I really can't believe it!"

"What, man?" said Charters, moving toward the door.

"Mr. Randall. He just climbed out of the rocket and walked away. Six seconds before it went up."

Charters stopped, staring with wild eyes. His face colored. Rage choked his voice.

"WHY?" barked the man.

Lampson stood at the window, his eyes lighting. He smiled, then laughed. And far away, a gleaming yellow-finned rocket drove up, up, finding the path through space that would carry it, alone, past the Moon, to the Sun.



THE GALACTIC GHOST

By MACK REYNOLDS

Gracefully, quietly, it came . . . landing on a deserted New Jersey field. Wonder and fear struck at the bowels of the Earth-people—not because of the ship itself, but because of its strange message.

DESPITE the widely publicized radar posts encircling our nation and the continuously alerted jet squadrons at its borders, the space ship was about to land before it was detected.

It settled gracefully, quietly, onto an empty field in northern New Jersey. And so unexpected was the event, so unbelievable the fact that man was being visited by aliens from space, that it was a full half hour

before the first extra was on the streets in New York, and forty minutes before the news buzzed through the Kremlin.

It might have taken considerably longer for man in earth's more isolated areas to hear of the event had not the alien taken a hand at this point. Approximately an hour after the landing, into the mind of every human on earth, irrespective of nation, language, age, or intellect, came the thought telepathically:

We come in peace. Prepare to receive our message.

It was a month before the message came.

During that period, more than ninety-nine per cent of the earth's population became aware of the visitor from space. Radio, television, newsreel, telegraph and newspapers reached the greater number; but word of mouth and even throbbing drums, played their part. In four weeks, savages along the Amazon and shepherds in Sinkiang knew that visitors from the stars had arrived with a message for man.

And all awaited the message: scientist and soldier, politician and revolutionist, millionaire and vagrant, bishop and whirling dervish, banker and pickpocket, society matron and street walker. And each was hoping for one thing, and afraid he'd hear another.

All efforts at communication with the alien ship had failed. The various welcoming delegations from the State of New Jersey, from the United States, and even from the United Nations, were ignored. No sign of life aboard was evident, and there seemed no means of entrance to the spacecraft. It sat there impassively; its tremendous, saucer-like shape seemed almost like a beautiful monument.

At the end of a month, when world-wide interest in the visitor from space was at its height, the message came. And once again it was impressed upon the mind of every human being on earth:

Man, know this: Your world is fated to complete destruction. Ordinarily, we of the Galactic Union would not have contacted man until he had progressed much further and was ready to take his place among us.

But this emergency makes necessary that we take immediate steps if your kind is to be saved from complete obliteration.

In order to preserve your race, we are making efforts to prepare another planet, an uninhabited one, to receive your colonists. Unfortunately, our means for transporting you to your new world are limited; only a handful can be taken. You are safe for another five of your earth years. At the end of that period we will return. Have a thousand of your people ready for their escape.

THE President of the United States lifted an eyebrow wearily and rapped again for order.

"Gentlemen, please! . . . Let us get back to the fundamental question. Summed up, it amounts to this: only one thousand persons, out of a world population of approximately two billions, are going to be able to escape the earth's destruction. In other words, one out of every two million. It is going to be most difficult to choose."

Herr Ernst Oberfeld tapped his glasses fretfully on the conference table. "Mr. President, it need not be quite as bad as all that. After all, we must choose the earth's best specimens to carry on our race. I believe we will find that the combined populations of Europe and North America total somewhat less than a billion. If we go still further and eliminate all inferior . . ."

Monsieur Pierre Duclos flushed. "Herr Oberfeld should keep in mind that his presence at this meeting at all was opposed vigorously by some of the delegates. Isn't it somewhat too soon after his country's debacle to again broadcast its super-race theories?"

The British representative spoke up. "My dear Duclos, although I agree with you completely in essence, still it must be pointed out that if we were to handle this allocation on a strictly numerical basis, that our Chinese friends would be allotted something like 200 colonists, while Great Britain would have perhaps twenty."

Maxim Gregoroff grunted, "Hardly enough for the Royal family, eh?"

Lord Harriman was on his feet. "Sir, I might echo what Monsieur Duclos has said to Herr Oberfeld. It was in spite of the protest from a considerable number of dele-

gates to this conference that your nation is represented at all."

Gregoroff's fist thumped on the table and his face went beet red. "It is as expected! You plan to monopolize the escape ship for the imperialistic nations! The atom bomb will probably be used to destroy all other countries!"

The President of the United States held up his hand. This whole thing was getting more chaotic by the minute. As a matter of fact, instructions from Congress were that he explain that the United States expected to have at least one third of the total. This, in view of the fact that the aliens had landed in New Jersey, obviously seeing that the United States was the foremost nation of the world, and, further, in view of the fact that this country was a melting pot of all nations and consequently produced what might be called the "average" member of the human race.

However, that would have to wait. Order had to be brought to this conference if anything was to be accomplished.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!" he called. "These accusations. We are getting nowhere. I have taken the liberty to make arrangements to have the representative of the newly formed Congress of American Sciences address you. Are you agreeable?" He raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and meeting no objection, pressed the button on the table before him.

Professor Manklethorp was ushered in, bobbed his head to the assembled delegates and came to the point immediately. "The problem which you are discussing has many ramifications. I would like to bring to your attention a few which should be examined with care.

"First, the choice of colonists must not be on a national basis, nor on one based upon political or monetary prominence. If it is, we, as a race, are doomed. This new planet, no matter how well prepared for us by the Galactic Union, is going to be a challenge such as man has never faced before. This challenge cannot be met by politicians, no matter how glib, nor by wealthy men, no matter how many dollars they possess, nor by titled ones, no matter how old and honored their names. We must pick trained specialists who will be able

to meet the problems that arise in the new world.

"Our congress recommends that all persons, of all nations, who have college degrees, be given thorough tests both for I.Q. and for accumulated knowledge, and that the highest thousand be chosen irrespective of nation or race."

Pandit Hari Kuanai smiled quietly. "May I ask the learned professor a question?"

"Of course. That is why I am here. We want only to have this matter decided on a strictly scientific basis."

"My poverty stricken country has a population of possibly one fifth of the world total, but fewer university men than one of your large cities might boast. Your desire to choose men by their I.Q. has its merits, but I have no doubt that in my country we have men of tremendous intelligence who cannot even read or write, aside from having a university degree. Must my widely illiterate people go unrepresented in the new world?"

A muscle twitched in the professor's face. "Needless to say, the Congress of American Sciences has considered that. However, we must view this matter in a spirit of sacrifice. The best of the world's population must go to the new world. Possibly whole nations will go without representation. It is too bad . . . but, unfortunately, necessary."

Even Carlesen put up his finger for recognition. "It seems to me there is another serious loophole in the professor's recommendation. He wants the thousand to be made up of university graduates of high I.Q. and considerable accumulated knowledge. I am afraid I foresee the new world being populated with elderly scholars." He smiled. "Like the professor himself, who, I understand, has a phenomenal I.Q."

Monsieur Duclos nodded. "He is right. We must consider the need to send perfect physical specimens." He looked down at his own small and bent body. "Gentlemen," he said wryly, "has it occurred to you that none of us here at this conference are suitable to be represented among the thousand?"

They ignored him.

A pale faced delegate in black, who had thus far said nothing, spoke up softly, "I have been instructed to inform you that our organization demands that all of the colo-

nists be of the true faith."

His words were drowned by the shouting of half a dozen of the conference delegates. Loud above them all could be heard the bellow of Maxim Gregoroff.

"Our Union now includes the population of approximately half the world. Our allotment, consequently, will be five hundred colonists, of the one thousand. We will choose them by our own methods."

Lord Harriman murmured, "Undoubtedly, by starting at the top of the party membership list and taking the first five hundred names beginning with your leader."

The President of the United States ran his hand through his hair and then roughly down the side of his face. A messenger handed him a slip of paper. He read it and intensified his pounding on the table.

"Gentlemen," he shouted. "If Professor Manklethorp is through, we have here a request from the International Physical Culture Society to have their representative heard."

"I know," Sven Carlesen said. "He wants all of the colonists to be able to chin themselves twenty-five times as the first requisite."

AT THE end of the five year period the space ship came again, settling into the identical field where it had first landed. This time a delegation awaited it, and a multitude that stretched as far as the eye could see.

A telepathic message came from the visitor from space almost immediately.

Choose from your number three representatives to discuss the situation with us.

Within ten minutes, three advanced and entered the ship by way of a port that opened before them as they approached. Among their number was Pierre Duclos. A passage stretched before them, and, seeing no one, they hesitated a moment before following it to its further end. Monsieur Duclos led the way, depending only slightly on his cane to aid his bent body.

A door opened and they were confronted by the figure of a man seated at a desk. It was several moments before they realized that the entity before them was masked so cleverly that they had been led to believe him human.

He said in faultless English, "I note that

you have penetrated my disguise. I thought it would be easier for you if I hid my true appearance. Until your people are used to alien life forms, I must use this measure."

Monsieur Duclos bowed. "We appreciate your consideration, but I assure you that our . . ."

The alien waved a gloved hand. "Please, no argument. My appearance would probably nauseate you. But it is of no importance. Pray be seated." He noted the cane, and nodded to the little Frenchman. "You sir, must be highly thought of to rate being chosen one of the thousand in view of your age and health."

Although he was not at ease in the presence of the representative of the Galactic Union, Monsieur Duclos allowed himself a wry smile. "You misunderstand. I am not one of the colonists. My presence here at this meeting is an honor that has been awarded me in return for some small services in aiding in the selection of the favored ones."

"And what were these services?"

"Of no real importance. I suppose you might say that the most important was that I was the first to refuse to be a colonist."

Bently, one of the other earthmen spoke up, "Had it not been for Pierre Duclos, it is doubtful if the thousand would have been chosen, and even possible that there would be no earth to which to return for your colonists."

Behind the mask the eyes of the alien gleamed, "Enlighten me further, please."

Duclos demurred, "You honor me overmuch, Mr. Bently. Let us approach the problem of the colonists and their transportation."

But John Bently went on, "For more than two years after your ship's departure, complete confusion reigned in regard to selection of the thousand. Happily, all out warfare between nations had been avoided although conditions were rapidly coming to a point where it was momentarily expected.

"Each race, each nation, each religion, even each sex, thought they should have the greater representation. And each of these groups in turn were divided into sub-groups by wealth, age, class, education and others. Almost everyone on earth knew of some reason why he should be one of the colonists.

And most of us were willing to take any steps to make our desire come true."

The alien said, "That was to be expected. And then?"

"And then Pierre Duclos formed his Society of Racial Preservation whose first requisite for membership was a refusal to become one of the colonists. The purpose of the organization was to find the thousand most suitable colonists without regard to race, nationality, creed, color, education, class, wealth or any other grouping.

"**A**T FIRST, the growth of membership was slow, but, after a time, man saw that his chance of survival as an individual was practically nil, that his chance of being chosen was at best less than one in two million. When he realized this, his next desire was to make sure that, even though he as an individual was doomed, the race survived. Membership in the society grew rapidly and internationally. The members, you might say, were fanatical. Why not? They knew that they had less than five years to live. Why not sacrifice those last years of life to such a noble cause?

"As the society grew in strength, nothing could stand before it. Governments that stood in the way were overthrown, social systems abolished, prejudices and institutions that had stood for centuries were wiped out. It became necessary to institute world government, to guarantee to all equal opportunity. Step by step, the society took the measures necessary to insure the selection of the best specimens earth had to offer.

"And scientific development was pushed to the utmost. We wished to send our colonists off with as much as earth could possibly give them. We eliminated a dozen diseases that have plagued us for centuries; we devised a thousand new tools and techniques."

"In short," said the alien, "because of this stimulus, man has progressed as much in this past few years as he could have expected in the next fifty."

"That is correct," Pierre Duclos said. "It is unfortunate that now we have on our threshold a world really worth living in, that it is fated to be destroyed."

"I see," said the alien, what would have been a smile on a human face flickered on

his. "I am glad to report that the danger which confronted the earth has been removed and the need to populate the new planet with colonists in order to preserve your race is now eliminated.

"Gentlemen, the earth is safe. Man may go on with his plans without fear of destruction."

Monsieur Duclos fingered his cane thoughtfully while the other two earthmen jumped to their feet, thumped each other's backs, shouted, and otherwise demonstrated their joy. They finally dashed from the room and from the space craft to give the news to the world.

The alien eyed the little Frenchman. "And why have you remained?"

"I do not believe the world was faced with destruction, monsieur. I have come to the conclusion that you have perpetrated a farce upon mankind."

The alien sat himself down at the desk again. "I see you will need an explanation. But you are wrong, you know. Faced with destruction you were. The destruction, however, was not a matter of collision with some other body, or whatever you might have imagined. The destruction would have come from within. Man was on the verge of destroying himself. One more conflict, or, at most, two, would have done it.

"The Galactic Union has long been aware of man who has developed mechanically in a phenomenal manner but has not been able to develop socially to the point where his science is less than a danger. This ship was sent to you in hopes of accomplishing exactly what has been accomplished. We believed your racial instinct would be strong enough to unite you when the race as a whole thought it was threatened with extinction."

The alien got to his feet. "I am afraid we must leave now. Let me say that I hope that man will soon be able to take his place in the Galactic Union."

Monsieur Duclos winced. "The Galactic Union," he said. "The League of Nations and the United Nations were bad enough." He smiled wryly. "And I thought that with the establishment of a world government, we had abolished such conferences forever. I can just see myself as the first delegate from earth. Heaven forbid!"

THE TOY

By BRYAN BERRY

It was Fletcher Gibson's birthday, and certainly for a man so lonely, so distraught, so out of place in this twenty-fourth century . . . it was only right and proper to buy him an Imagi-toy.

ALL of a sudden, as if from nowhere, (or as if from some magician's gigantic but invisible hat) Gibson appeared, blinking and touching himself to make sure he was really there. He pinched himself tentatively and it hurt. He *was* really there! The sun was warming. The trees were fine and old and green and just as they had been. And it was only three minutes walk to his own home.

Three minutes walk! He laughed aloud.

A dog that had been busy nibbling itself nearby looked up, all amazed, at this man who was standing alone in the middle of the road, feeling himself gingerly and laughing.

And then, with strange and excited little cries Mr. Fletcher Gibson started to run awkwardly off down Maple Avenue into the deep afternoon shadow of the tree tunnel that led to the south end of the small and slumbering town.

But that isn't the start of the story. Oh no. And we're not going to start at the start, anyway, for time's a peculiar thing and frequently "start" and "end" are pretty well meaningless words as you'll possibly agree and possibly won't.

Anyhow, by your leave, we'll start the tale at what may as well be called, for want of a better word, the "middle."

Fletcher Gibson muttered many unprintable words. He pressed many buttons and a number of lights winked on the dashboard. Green lights, red lights. One blue light. But nothing else happened at all. The turbo-car refused to move another inch.

He'd had trouble before but it had never cracked up on him like this. And only a few yards from the drive, too. It might

have waited until he'd got it into the garage.

He snorted his irritation and opened the door, stepping out onto the sidewalk.

"Hullo, Mr. Gibson," a voice said. He turned. It was Jim Saxby, his neighbor's son.

"Why, hullo there, Jimmy."

"Car broke down?"

Fletcher Gibson ran a finger round his collar, nodded. "That's about it, I guess."

The boy's foot tapped the sidewalk. "Can I take a look?" he asked, a small, shy smile creeping about his mouth, lingering.

Fletcher Gibson frowned, then laughed. "Sure you can, son," he said, hating the boy, hating himself and his predicament. Hating, in fact, everything. Everything.

And why should he hate everything, you ask? Well, you'd hate everything, too, wouldn't you, if you were the last man—the very last, mind—in the world? And that's what Gibson was, you see. Ah yes, I know Jimmy Saxby was talking to him, but then Jimmy Saxby wasn't human. Wasn't human at all.

"There's your trouble," said the boy, pointing an eleven year old finger at the closed bonnet of the turbo-car, his eyes flecking momentarily with gold, then clearing, brightening.

Gibson opened his mouth, closed it.

The boy, watching him, seemed suddenly abashed. "Gee, I didn't mean . . ." he started, looking down.

"That's all right, son. Let's open the bonnet up, shall we? Then you can show me what's wrong."

The kid hadn't meant it. All the others had strict instructions not to use their non-human powers when he was around and, normally, they didn't. The Saxby kid had just made a slip, that was all. He'd forgotten



who he was talking to and had used X-ray vision and stepped up his mechanical perception so that he could find the fault in the shortest possible time. He hadn't meant to do it; it had just come naturally to him and he'd forgotten that he wasn't dealing with one of his own kind.

They lifted the bonnet of the turbo-car. The boy pointed again. "Somewhere there," he said, knowing the exact spot but pretending he didn't. "Ah."

"Found it, Jimmy?"

"Think so, yeah."

Think so, he says. He knows so. "Anything be done about it or will I have tovisor the garage?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind, I guess I might be able to fix her for you."

He guesses he might. Might! "Go right ahead, Jimmy. If you can manage it I'd be very grateful."

The boy smiled, delving into the metal brain of the car. His fingers fluttered, adjusting swiftly. "Press the switch now," he instructed, a minute later.

Gibson did so. There was a purr. A hum. A faint thunder. The turbo-car was mended and Fletcher Gibson got inside and said: "Thanks very much, Jimmy. Lucky for me you were passing," and he smiled with his mouth but his eyes were savage.

"Any time, Mr. Gibson," said the boy, grinning brightly. "Any time."

FLETCHER GIBSON drove the car up the street, up the drive into his garage. He stilled the motor and sat in the fresh cool silence while the savagery drained away out of him. It was stupid to get mad about things. Stupid. Yet wouldn't anyone get mad if they were in his position? Even that, when you thought about it, was stupid; no one else *could* be in his position. He was unique. Alone. Solitary. Oh, very damned solitary.

The savagery returned.

He slammed out of the car and into the house. Slam bang here, slam bang there. It didn't help very much and it was very childish, of course, and he should have known better. He should have grown used to things being the way they were; should have acclimatized himself—wasn't that the word they used? Oh, they were very good to him.

Treated him fine, when you considered it all. Tried not to use any of their powers when he was about. Tried, too, not to be impatient when they were telling him things and he had to concentrate and think hard before he could take it in.

Why was he in this predicament? What was he doing here among strange people in a strange time he should never have seen but only, maybe, dreamed about? Ah well, it happened that this man Fletcher Gibson, and none other, was the one who went forward in time in the fine year 1954 and of whom not a toenail, limb, eyebrow, scrap of skin, fragment of intestine or anything at all was ever seen again. Ever.

He didn't go five years into the future, as he was supposed to have done, because something went wrong somewhere, (a bit of grit fouling a cog in the time machine? A decimal point wrong in a calculation?) and on he went, Mr. Fletcher Gibson, the traveler in time, on and on, all unknowing, to land himself many, many years ahead of where he should have done.

And there weren't any humans there, when he arrived. Not real humans. Not the sort he'd left behind him.

They didn't have tentacles or seven heads or anything of that nature, mind. There weren't any physical differences, unless you counted the generally finer cast of features and the odd gilding of the eyes when they applied X-ray vision. But they weren't homo sapiens. They'd been called homo superior by their discoverers, and now that their discoverers had died out they were just, simply, men.

Except to Fletcher Gibson.

They had told him, when he arrived bewildered in their midst, that he couldn't go back again. They looked up the year 1954 in their history books and discovered that a Fletcher Gibson *had* gone into a time machine but had never come out of it. Thus history said he hadn't returned from the future so obviously they couldn't allow him to return, a pity though it was.

He'd argued with them for a long time but they were adamant. They didn't feel that history ought to be upset and, while they were very sorry for him, of course, they didn't see what they could do except keep him safe, secure and as happy as

possible in their own time period until he died.

So here was Fletcher Gibson, now, after five years of being kept safe and secure, still very far from being happy about anything at all.

Even the kids were brighter than he was, he savagely thought. That Saxby brat, now, fixing up his turbo-car that way. The boy had seen what was wrong instantly and had almost certainly spent longer than necessary fixing the darned thing once he had realized that he was talking to the anachronistic Mr. Gibson. Such kindness. Such condescension. Pagh!

And this house, too. It wasn't his. Not really his. They'd given it to him. They'd provided him with the wherewithall to live, also, just so's he wouldn't always be at them about getting back to his own time and so on and so forth. So, of course, he was really being kept. *Kept!*

If he'd been a prisoner, he thought, it would have been better, in a way, than this. At least he'd be able to hate his captors without feeling ashamed when he did so. But this—this protective custody, this helpfulness, this considerate kindness, hateful, hateful!

He indicated how hateful he thought it was by scowling fiercely out of the window at the bright emerald lawn and the small pleasant trees of the garden out front. The scowl faded. He was about to have, he noticed, a visitor.

A round, chubby pumpkin of a man he was, this visitor, and he trotted up the path and rang the bell and said what his name was to the robot voice-lock and then, when the door was open, beamed in at Gibson. "Well hullo there. Glad you're at home."

Gibson held the door open and ushered his visitor through into the lounge. Harry Packer was one of the few of these strange people with whom he ever felt at ease and this was probably due to Packer's interest in the ancient race homo sapiens of which Gibson himself was a living fossil member.

"And what brought you here?" he enquired when his visitor was seated, glass in hand, cigarette lit.

Packer waved a hand. "Nothing special," he lied. "Just thought I'd drop in. Had the day off from work as a matter of fact."

"Illness?"

"That's what I told the boss on the visor," Packer grinned. "Real reason was that I wanted to go across to Central City to pick up my kid's birthday present. Just got back."

"Birthday, ha!" said Gibson sourly. "I got a birthday coming up soon."

"Yes?" said Packer vaguely, though this was what he had come to find out. "When?"

"Twenty-seventh of this month to be exact," grunted Gibson. "Fine lot of presents I shall get with everyone I knew dead and buried in their graves and . . ."

"Now we mustn't get bitter," said Packer, "must we? Doesn't do any good at all. Besides, I may have some good news for you soon . . ."

"Good news? What do you mean?"

"I've been investigating."

"Yes?"

"The Government Security people . . ."

Gibson's eyes were very bright. "Yes? What did they tell you? Can they send me back? *Will* they send me back?" He was quivering with excitement. All over, shaking. Quiver, shake. Quiver, shake.

"Don't get all worked up, now. Nothing definite yet. They're making further investigations, though. Seems someone's come up with the old theory of parallel time tracks once more. They think that if they can get you back to a time track that says you *did* return, then everything'll be all right."

"Then they've got a time machine? I can return?" He was beside himself with excitement.

Packer shook his head. "Not yet. Like I told you, they're still investigating. You'll have to be patient." He had said too much already and he realized it. "I'll let you know what happens. Don't go trying to contact the Government people, now, or you'll upset everything. Leave it all to me." His cigarette enabled a gray smoke tree to grow, leaf, bloom, disperse its leaves and fade away.

"But I don't see why . . ." began Gibson.

"Ask no questions," said Mr. Packer, raising a cautionary hand, "and you'll be told no lies. Leave everything to me and, above all, be patient." And with that he went on to talk of other, less interesting things to which his host, as was natural under the

circumstances, paid scant attention.

"Now promise," Packer said, on the doorstep later, about to go. "Promise you won't go and spoil everything by trying to visor the Government people."

"Oh, all right, I promise," said Gibson. "Thanks for letting me know about it, anyway. Good-bye." The door closed. He was alone once again. Yet somehow not so very much alone as before. Hope had entered with Mr. Packer's words; had entered and remained. Hope of escape, hope of return to normality out of this terrible world where men weren't men at all. Gibson watched his visitor's retreating figure as it pattered down the path and stepped onto the moving sidewalk to be carried out of sight among the plastoid villas. He's one of them, he thought, watching. But the savagery had gone and hope, small, of pin-head size but warming and soothing nevertheless, had taken its place.

NOW the 27th of the month—Fletcher Gibson's birthday, you'll recall—fell on a Saturday, and a fine golden sort of a day it was, too. The sky was a sheet of blue silk with just a handful of woollen clouds crouching in a corner of it, far off; and there were plenty of birds singing and numerous trees all a-bloom and anyone seeing such a fine day would have found it hard to believe that anyone could be anything but happy at such a time.

But Mr. Gibson, waking from an afternoon nap, had a scowl upon his face. Six days, he thought as he rolled the salt taste of sleep about and around in his mouth. Six days since Packer had come and babbled about the Government people planning to send him back and still no sign of anything being done. He grunted, remembering what day it was. Here it was his birthday, too, and him years and years ahead of where he should have been. No cards, no presents. Bah!

The bell chimed.

He stirred himself, hearing the voice-lock announce that Mr. Harry Packer was once again calling on him.

"Happy birthday," said Packer, red-apple cheeks glowing. Behind him, clustered round the porch, were other neighbors. Paul Saxby, his wife and son; the Mortimers,

the Schultz family. All smiling. All saying: "Happy birthday."

Gibson was taken aback. He blinked, peered, scratched his chin, opened his eyes wider, made noises in his throat and at last, as though with great difficulty, said: "Why—why, thank you."

"Thought we'd let you know we hadn't forgotten your birthday," said Packer, airily waving a hand to indicate the neighbors grouped behind him. "Got a present for you, too."

"A present?"

"That's right. Bet you can't guess what it is." He turned to the others, grinning. "Bet he can't guess, eh?"

They laughed and nodded, voicelessly agreeing.

Mr. Gibson was bewildered, was amazed. And then, like a seed that germinates and produces a shoot in sweet spring rains, an idea grew inside him, becoming a great hope, a yearning, a desire, a belief, a certainty!

"I believe he's guessed it," laughed Packer, studying him.

"Not . . . ?"

"Well, what do you want most of all, eh, Gibson?"

"You can't mean . . . ?"

"Nothing else but. Finally got it fixed up with the Government people. Thought we'd save it up for your birthday, didn't we?" he enquired of the others.

They assured Gibson that that had been what they'd thought.

"Oh thank you, thank you!" shrilled Gibson in delight. "Where do I have to go? What must I do? Will I get back to where I started from? Will I? Can I? Shall I?" He ran out of breath, waved his hands, then said: "Oh, come inside, everybody. Come inside."

They sat in the lounge and drank while Packer explained things. "You don't have to worry a scrap, now. You'll go right back to a time track which says you did return. But the five years you've spent here will also have elapsed in the world you're returning to. You'll go back but you'll be five years older than when you left. O.K.?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"When do you want to leave?"

"Today. Now. This minute," laughed

Fletcher Gibson, bouncing his lean, soured body up and down on the spongicouch like a three year old.

SO THEN and there it was decided. Packer told him that they could not all go with him to the place where the temporal displacer, or time machine, had been constructed. He alone would accompany him.

On the doorstep, after shutting all the doors and switching off the electroboiler, Gibson said fond farewells to all his neighbors who, to a man, woman and child, wished him good luck on his journey through the years back and back to his final strange destination.

Packer took him, then, by turbo-car through the summer-gilded town along the white roads. They drove for half an hour.

"Where is this machine? Why have the Government people themselves never told me about these investigations?" queried Gibson.

His companion smiled. "Ask no questions," he said, "and you'll be told no lies. We're almost there. Be patient."

"But we're going back again. We've been driving in a circle."

"I know. Never mind."

"But this is my street we're turning down."

"Yes."

"And my house we're stopping at."

Mr. Packer stilled the motor, staring at his companion. "They've been fixing up the machine," he explained, "inside your house."

"Fixing up. . . . In THERE?"

"That's right. Come on. It'll be ready by now." He led the bewildered Gibson up his own drive and into his own house and then through to the lounge he had left so recently. "Here we are," he said.

A small machine stood near the door that led into the study. Gibson saw that a good deal of the study furniture had been piled about here and there in the lounge. Wires from the machine ran through freshly bored holes in the wall that divided the two rooms. It was all very strange. Mr. Gibson said that he thought it was all very strange. Packer nodded.

"Wasn't like this, I suppose, when you got into that first time machine?"

Gibson shook his head. "Not a bit like it. Are you sure this thing's going to work?" He was a little frightened now.

"Sure it'll work," Packer said heartily. "Now listen while I tell you what to do. Go straight into that study there the moment I tell you. The study itself is the time machine, now, thanks to this machine here. As soon as you go through you'll step out of this time period into one you'll recognize. You'll end up somewhere in the town you left so many years ago. You'll have some explaining to do, of course. People will want to know where you've come from, where you've been and so on. I suggest you use amnesia as your excuse. It'll be safest and easiest, too. The professor who built that time machine and sent you into the future died, according to the books we discovered, two years after you vanished, so if you say you never stepped into that time machine there'll be nobody there to say otherwise. O.K. now?"

Gibson nodded, the fright leaving him and a huge and very wonderful anticipation taking its place. He stood beside the study door.

Packer switched switches on the machine, pushed buttons. There was a humming as of a million bees.

"Now," said Packer. . . .

WHEN Packer walked back down the path they had already started fixing the "NO TRESPASSING: BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNMENT" sign on Gibson's front gate. The force field projector was being brought up from the parked turbo-lorry, too. The driver was leaning out of the cab window. "Afternoon," he said, nodding to Packer. "I heard about what's been going on in there. How did he take it?"

Packer smiled tiredly. "Like a lamb," he replied. "It was more or less what he wanted."

"You really had a temporal displacer rigged up in there?"

"Lord no. Government wouldn't hear of it."

"What *is* in there, then?"

"A machine based on the principle of the Imagitoys. Haven't you read the ads: 'Let Your Child take his Vacation where

He Wants to Take it; Buy Him an Imagitoy?"

"Those things? Sure, I've heard of 'em. You mean . . . ?"

Packer nodded. "I only thought of it when I was up at the Imagitoy Center buying one for my kid. They're pretty wonderful things, you know. Your own thoughts and desires are caught on mentabeams and relayed straight back at you, instantaneously, as solid, three dimensional images complete in every detail: They are hallucinations, of course, in the Imagitoy proper, but tangible, audible, and incredibly real hallucinations nevertheless. It took a bit of time to persuade the Government to give their permission, but they agreed in the end. Thought it would be the best thing for him, I guess, same as the rest of us did."

"You said that this thing in there was based on the Imagitoy, didn't you?" the truck driver enquired, frowning.

"I did, yes. We used the Imagitoy principle to create the mentabeam pattern of Gibson's thoughts, but from that we build the hallucination into actual reality by using the matter duplication principle."

"Huh?" The truck driver blinked.

"Well, you know that the Shnelling-Martins formulae can be used to break all matter down into energy patterns which can be transmitted from one point to another and then reassembled once more?"

"The transmitter units, you mean? Yes, I know about them, but this business of making hallucinations into realities . . ."

"The same principle is used. The mentabeams give us the nature of the object direct from Gibson's own mind. That information is communicated to an electronic microlibrary which gives the necessary Shnelling-Martins energy wave pattern and that, in turn, is fed to the duplicator which, in this instance, is used simply to create matter from the wave pattern, not to re-create or reassemble it out of wave patterns that are themselves the results of a matter-energy breakdown.

"Inside that building, now," he went on, turning to look at it once more, "Gibson will step into the room imagining that he is stepping back into his own world, and that is what he will be doing, in effect. He'll be stepping into a specially created reality;

and an almost perfect reality, too, since he'll remember and project the good things about his past life. The only setbacks he'll have will be those dictated by his subconscious through a sense of compensation."

"But what about the question of space in that place?" the driver exclaimed, perplexed. "If the guy's going to live out his life within that building there'll come a time when the created objects will squeeze him up through the roof, won't there?"

Packer shook his head. "No," he said. "When Gibson turns his thoughts away from something it is immediately dissembled into energy wave patterns; these are recorded in case he wants to see or handle that exact object again, and then they are fed back as raw energy into the creator unit once again."

"Don't you think it would have been simpler just to send him back in time through a temporal displacer?"

Packer shook his head vehemently. "Not on your life. Our research teams that have been investigating the various problems of time travel and temporal paradox are very strict on that kind of thing. They've proved, statistically and definitely, that vast changes could be made to our present by even the slightest of alterations in the past. Recorded history tells us that Gibson did not return from his trip into the future and we can't play around with recorded history."

"But if we did . . ."

". . . If we did send Gibson back? I hate to think of it. He'd know about us, about our civilization, about our being more than man. And he'd tell someone about it, eventually."

"So what?"

PACKER moved his hands in the air. "So all sorts of things. History tells us that the imminent atomic war of 1970 was averted through the actions of one of our own race—one of the very first homo superiors. Supposing the man Gibson told about us didn't like the idea of creatures who were superior to men? Suppose he sought out the first of us? Suppose the man and the woman from whom our race descended were killed, in some way, before they could bear children? Suppose the atomic war had not been averted?" He smiled a

little grimly and waved at the buildings, at the street, at the men who were installing the force field projector that would cut off Mr. Fletcher Gibson forever and forever, as long as he lived, from the real and genuine twenty-fourth century world. "All this," he went on quietly, "might never exist, if our friend Gibson got back to his own period in time."

Six seconds later there came final, conclusive and very terrible proof of Mr. Packer's words, of his theory.

But Mr. Packer, of course, was not there to witness it. Nor was the driver of the turbotruck, nor the truck itself, nor the houses, streets, buildings, force field projector. . . . Nor, in fact, was anything there to witness the miraculous proof. Nothing living moved over the vast, baked, blistered desertland and the only sound in that solemn emptiness was that of a red dust wind that keened its way in lamentation and was heard by not a single ear.

For Mr. Packer and his friends, you see, made one bad error. One very regrettable error. One unfortunately irrevocable error.

They had assumed that Gibson would step into his study expecting to find himself in his own world once more, transported there, instantly, by a temporal displacement field surrounding the room.

But Gibson did not do exactly that. His acceptance of Packer's statement that the room itself was the time machine was but a surface acceptance. Subconsciously he expected to find, when he entered the study, some form of machine that he could recognize as being somewhat similar to that which he had entered before.

And find it he did. Naturally.

"Time Machine," said his mind.

"Time Machine," relayed the mentabeam, swiftly, to the microlibrary.

"Time Machine," the microlibrary assented, searching within itself for the necessary data, the respective wave-energy patterns, its complex electronic brain cells working on this difficult problem at incredible speeds, feeding the patterns down into the intricate channel nerves of the matter creator unit which, triumphantly yet almost without exerting itself, announced sound-

lessly to the waiting man: "TIME MACHINE!" The machine was in the center of the room.

Gibson nodded to himself when he saw it, recognizing it as an advancement on the one he had entered before, but recognizing it, nevertheless.

He did not step into it right away. Instead he turned and tried to open the door, intending to go out and ask Packer why he had told him that the room itself was the time machine. But the door was locked and no sound came from without. No sound at all.

"Perhaps Packer never got permission to send me back at all," he said to himself. "Perhaps that's why he wanted to get me inside here as soon as possible. I'd better ask him about that." He pounded on the door while—

While outside, Packer was talking to the turbotruck driver about the Imagitoy.

The door wouldn't move and Packer didn't answer. Gibson turned his attention to the cage-like silvered shape of the time-machine, walking round it. The machine itself, he knew, merely served as a confinement for the temporal displacement waves; it would not return with him but would merely serve as the gun from which he himself, the bullet, would be shot. He stood thinking this while—

While Packer described the possible effects of tampering with the past.

"Well," said Mr. Fletcher Gibson, stepping at last into the temporal displacer, "1954—here I come!"

And with that swift and apparently inconsequential movement the twenty-first, twenty-second, twenty-third and twenty-fourth century civilizations were removed, deftly, from the planet Earth.

All of a sudden, as if from nowhere, (or as if from some magician's gigantic but invisible hat) Gibson appeared, blinking and touching himself to make sure he was really there. He pinched himself tentatively and it hurt. He *was* really there! The sun was warming. The trees were fine and old and green and just as they had been. And it was only three minutes walk from his own home. . . .





THE MAN THE TECH-MEN MADE

By FOX B. HOLDEN

He was a man of a hundred planets, drawn from the blackness of space to save a tech-galaxy from disintegration. He was Kane, the warrior-mechanic . . . memory-king of knowledgeless worlds . . . savior to millions . . . maniac to the ruling few—so they threw a dragnet over the stars to stop the heretic.

THE relentless heat of yellow-white twin suns boiled the thin desert air and it seared his laboring lungs, and he knew why this was called the Desert of One Thousand Mirages. The Desert of One Thousand Hells would have been a better name.

They said a man could go mad here. If not from the crazily twisting, undulating heat shapes themselves, then from the pain-tortured vagaries of his own brain. But mad or not, Jonny Kane knew he must somehow stay in the saddle that was not fashioned for human buttocks; stay astride the

silver skinned, hairless beast never bred for human transportation, and ride.

They could be all around him, of course, and he might never know until it was too late to wheel his fleet qharaak and dash again for freedom in yet another direction across the shifting, low-duned wastes. They could be but yards behind him but there was not the strength to look back, only to grip the thick reins twined about his bleeding wrists, to keep his cramped legs stiff about the qharaak's sloping flanks. And ride, and choke on the smoking sand.

His brain bubbled inside his head, and he shut his eyes.

He would tire and lose his grip, and so lose his mount, and fry to death on the blinding whiteness of the sand. Or he would go crashing into them, and they would lead him back to the outpost village, and his death would be of their making. What chance, after all, had an Earth-descendant against the copper skinned native police of a Procyon planet, who rode its deserts as if they were the cool, green fields of the mother world of which his father had so often spoken? What chance?

There was flame in his lungs, and fire was burning the insides of his half naked, once strong young body into crumbling, blackened ash. Ride—

"Hold! Hold, or there's a barb through your evil heart!"

The booming command was from the left. And he wheeled the qharaak so sharply it reared and nearly lost its sextuple footing in the shifting sand. A sudden thrummm went past one ear. He tried to loose his legs enough for a kick in the lunging animal's flanks, but the muscles in them were like steel clamps. They would not move.

The reins about his wrists were slippery and stinging with sweat and sand as both mixed with his blood, and were pulled easily enough from his grasp by the vicious, sudden tug from one side.

And then the overpowering odor of the other lathered qharaaks flooded his nostrils as the Dep-Troopers closed in upon him. He retched with it, and was sick.

"Come on, you! You're lucky our orders were dead or alive! Straighten up in that saddle or you'll go back dragged from it!"

A uyja-wood quirt split the skin across

his back and somehow brought him nearly erect in the saddle. He let his eyes open a little at a time against the searing blaze of the desert. They had him ringed with their bows and barb shafts, already had his qharaak tethered to one of their own.

And then they were taking him back. Back to the shimmering thing at the horizon that was the outpost village; back to the place where the gear box of his track car had stalled for want of proper lubricant, and where the chase had begun.

But he would not think about that. He knew about that, knew about the crime of it, and now he must try to think about the answers for the Dep-Court magistrate. They would be the same answers he had given the other times. There could be no new answers. New or old, none would be understood, or believed, for that matter. But he must think about something, or the half-visions in his mind would bring certain insanity now; the half-visions, the things to see that did not exist to be seen, the glaring white-yellow eyes of Procyon herself and her satellite star, the cruel black-gold eyes of the bearded, iron muscled Dep-Troopers that had caught him.

"MAKE the prisoner stand straight before this court, Trooper!"

The flesh splitting lash of pain wrenched him into a sort of pseudo-consciousness. He struggled to rise from the rough wooden floor on which he'd been thrown, and brought sound back to his ears, fuzzy sight to his eyes. The sound was of the crowd. A muffled crowd sound; they would still be outside, still struggling for a look at his broken down track despite the heavy trooper cordons that were around it, awaiting a qharaak team of sufficient size to haul it away.

And the sight was of a windowless, thin-walled cubicle, sole court of this narrow, desert fringe Department, and of the Prokyman judge, and the Troopers standing idly with their stinging quirts at either side and just behind him.

But he had been before Prokyman judges before. Once, even, there had been a jury of the local peasantry, and he had won an easy acquittal then because of his youth—it had been a full five Terrayears ago, when

he had been barely 12 years old.

He struggled unaided to his feet, faced the wooden throne like structure upon which the magistrate, girdled in coarse ruuk hide, sat toying with his polished mace of office. Beside him stood his Stenosmith. The Stenosmith held a slender scroll in one hand, but for the moment his legal superior let it go unnoticed, and fixed the Court's prisoner with a gaze as hard as Terrestrial diamonds.

"Jon Kane, aged 17 Sol III years, second generation Sol III descendant, renegade colonial resident of the Sol III agricultural Department of J'iira-IX: do you understand the charges against you?"

He struggled to make his tongue move to form the clipped syllables of the Interplanetary. It was an old language, but he had never spoken it as easily as the one which his father had taught him, the one which he said had come from Terra. But he must learn the Interplanetary, his father had said for some day, he might venture beyond the blue fields of the Department where he lived; someday, perhaps, even use it to speak with the starmen of the great ITA, who landed on Procyon V every seven cycles. Some day, perhaps, and the work of the language tutors would not have gone in vain.

"Charges? These men have uttered no charges, Senior. They have pursued and threatened—"

"Silence! Civil use of your tongue, or no tongue at all! The law prescribes trial even for heretics under the age of eleven cycles, or you would not be so fortunate as to be standing where you are! Stenosmith, your scroll!"

In a quick motion the slender scroll was in the magistrate's hands, and in another it was spread before him.

"You are accused of entering this Department in a tracked vehicle being driven by its own power. The vehicle is of a type no longer receiving maintenance by the Inter-galactic Technical Alliance, and therefore could no longer function."

"But, Senior, my vehicle is one which had, by chance, been so well constructed that it never suffered breakdown until—"

"Prisoner, you are lying, and you know the penalty for perjury! Stenosmith, make note of the prisoner's falsehood to the Court.

The charges continue: You, Jon Kane, have been apprehended in neighboring Departments within the last two and one-half cycles, on various occasions, at the practice of making tools, and on one occasion at least, of using such tools in the attempted repair of malfunctioning facilities awaiting the legally prescribed maintenance of the ITA. Do you deny this?"

"I—"

"It is therefore the conclusion of this Court that the vehicle in which you rode into this Department was repaired and set into motion by yourself! Do you deny that?"

And suddenly Kane felt something stir inside him; felt it through the fatigue, through the pain, through the torture that threatened to be all-consuming. He stood straight.

"No, Senior! No, I do not deny it! And I not only repaired the track-car, I built it! I built it from parts I stole at night from abandoned scrap heaps! And I made it run!"

The words had barely left his lips before the Troopers who had kept the prescribed distance from him during interrogation by the Court were closed in upon him, their muscular hands on his arms and shoulders like so many vises.

The Prokyman judge had suddenly ceased toying with his mace, and then only the Stenosmith was moving, furiously recording Kane's unthinkable admission.

Then again the magistrate's voice; a slow, measured thing now, of sound without movement, of Death itself.

"Prisoner Jon Kane, I hereby grant you your right to admit insanity. Speak."

He could feel the magistrate's eyes burning into his own, could almost see the subtle turnings of the unrelenting brain behind them.

"I do not so admit!"

"Then it is the sentence of this Court that, at Meridian tomorrow, you shall be taken before a bow detachment of the Department Martial Patrol, and shot in the body until dead! Take him away!"

HE HAD thought that the sleep of exhaustion that must come would be dreamless, yet it was not; he had thought the pain in him that was so little relieved by stretching prone on the rough wooden

floor of his tiny cell would keep the past beyond all thought and memory, but it did not. And on the instant before waking from his tortured sleep on the hot morning of his execution, the two mingled to flash again across his numbed brain; there was a split second of it, and it was all his life.

There were the yellow books he had found. Yellow with age, yet somehow intact when they should have been ashes from the flames that had consumed all the rest, or disintegrated with the rot of forgetfulness and two centuries of time.

And there was his father, who had caught him in the act of reading them; his father, a quiet man who spoke little, as though many thoughts were forever kept at the threshold of his lips by the force of sheer will.

"Burn them, boy," he had said. "Burn them after you have finished. And your life shall depend on how silent you keep about what you have read in them. Your life, boy. When you have finished burn them!"

That had been all. He had expected a sound thrashing; he had expected to see the forbidden books torn to bits before his eyes. But that had been all.

And he had remembered. He had kept his silence as his father had said, as if his life depended on it, yet something had subtly grown in him that would not be repressed. He had fought it, he had lain awake in his rude cot and listened long hours to the night-sounds that wafted gently across the rolling blue fields of his father's farmland, and he had fought the thoughts, and had failed. But it was at that point in his life that Jonny Kane learned that ideas could not be burned.

He remembered how he had fashioned his first tool. With it, he had shaped better shoes for his father's qharaak teams. And then there had been other tools which he had learned to link together, and his share of the day's planting had been done long before the other men returned from the fields at sunset.

That was the time he had first been caught.

The tools had been destroyed. And then—

Then he had measured the dimensions of a new plot of land without moving from

the spot where he had made his computations with a stone in the soft loam, and that time—

Oh, the magistrate had not exaggerated. There had been many such crimes that he had committed, and he had not been able to help himself. Something within him would not let him stop—something that cried *why* and would not let him rest.

But when he had unearthed the rusted scrap heap of metal forged in strange shapes, he had not told his father. Nor did his father know when he had made the new tools, or when, a full cycle after that day, he had completed the thing of old metal for which the tools had been used. By stealth he had stolen the crude oil which fueled the lamps in his father's house, and after that—

After that, he knew only that it *ran!*

Until this village. Until yesterday. Until the day before he was to die.

And then Jonny Kane came awake at last.

He had barely opened his eyes, and had not yet risen to his feet when the sound of chains rattled noisily on the other side of the narrow cell door. Not so soon—not so soon; he had slept too long!

The narrow door was flung open, and his eyes hurt with the sudden burst of sunlight. But he saw the Prokyman jailer who had thrown him in here, and there was another. A somewhat shorter, more broad-shouldered man with skin the color of his own, who did not wear the crude tunic of the Dep-Troopers. His body was clothed in a silver-black uniform the like of which he had never seen before. And his face—

Jonny studied the face, shadowed though it was by the bright light that limned it.

It had to be a Terraman's face.

"You are the youth—Jonny Kane?" The Terraman spoke the Interplanetary fluidly but with a strange accent, and slowly, the only possible truth was bursting upon him. But why—here—? "Answer me!"

"Yes—yes, Senior, Jonny Kane."

"You are of interest to the Intergalactic Technical Alliance."

"I am to pay for my crime—"

"I have secured your release. My name is B-Haag; you will address me by my rank, which is Majtech. You will come with me. Your crime will only be paid for if you

prove unworthy of your recruitment for cadet training. Do you understand?"

Dazedly, Kane stumbled to his feet. Perhaps, after all, he had not awakened. He managed a feeble nod to the question which the Majtech had put to him.

"Very well then. Come along."

II

THE gently curved metal walls of the room gleamed softly in the pale, shadowless light, and for a moment the silent chamber seemed as huge and merciless as the infinity of Space which surrounded the great ship of which it was a part. The aged man who sat in full Alliance dress uniform before him, the Director Gentech himself, might for the moment have been a statue, and the panel of officers which flanked him hewn from the same stone.

He could feel the eyes of fully a third of the ship's huge complement, twelve hundred labortechs strong, boring steadily into his back as he stood, alone in the moment's awful silence, between them and these statue-men whose swift minds were, he knew, coldly weighing the accusations against him.

And then the silence was broken. Majtech B-Haaq was speaking again, his still-young face red with the heat of impressively realistic outrage.

"Sires, I have laid this man's record for the last eight years as a cadet technician before you plainly, with no embellishment. And his thanks to you for selecting him from among thousands of other less fortunate youths on his planet for training as an officer of the Intergalactic Technical Alliance has been—what other word can describe it—but mutiny?" And then Cadtech Jon Kane felt the full force of his accuser's glance upon him.

"You were taken from death itself in some hell town on a cinder of a planet in Canis Major. And in repayment for eight years of instruction that most men would gladly risk their lives to obtain you have compounded your long list of wrongdoings with this ultimate insult—refusal to accept your commission as Lenantech unless you are allowed to perform an experiment which is not only preposterous but which has had

fair evaluation by your superiors and been found worthless." B-Haaq paused for a quick breath. "Sires, I admit that perhaps the error has been ours from the first, and that the Prokymen who intended death for this young heretic knew whereof they spoke! As Cadtech Jon Kane's Section Overseer, I recommend his reduction, both mental and physical, to mineslave, and subsequent dispatch to one of the mine worlds of the star system from which he was recruited!"

It seemed suddenly to Kane that here was a crazy kind of irony—doubly crazy, doubly ironic because for the second time in his young life he was standing trial for things he had done which were not wrong! Had it been wrong in that other time, that other part of his life when he had built a vehicle that would move under its own power, with his own bare hands? Had that been so great an offense—and if so, against whom? The simple peasant folk of his planet? Against the ITA itself? If so, how?

And now again. After eight diligent years of trying to learn all that had been darkly forbidden to him before, and to thousands of others like him—after the happening of some miracle that had plucked him from a Proky death cell and placed him where he was encouraged to learn secrets that had once nearly cost him his life—after all that, now again, somehow, he had offended.

These men were not cruel men. Nor were the instructors overbearing taskmasters, nor the labortechs the arrogant men whom the planet-bound guardedly cursed with their derisive oaths "Space-Tinker!" Yet they were bound to their ideas; ideas which must be clung to for dear life lest they become exposed to the risk of change. Kane had often enough been reminded of why that was so. The ideas, the techniques, the procedures, they'd been savior to an entire segment of a once great civilization in a half forgotten past which the ITA stubbornly called its "history." And so they must be preserved at all costs. And that was why it was wrong to question; wrong to challenge the refusal of a new idea.

And that was why he was in trouble. Because these men were, in the last analysis, so little different from those who had surrounded him those eight years ago in the desert with their long bows.

Guardians of two star systems, they were.

The spine of civilization for over a hundred planets. Without which, the civilizations of each would surely backslide a second, and last, time. Implements of wood and stone would not support their ancient and infinitely complex structures for long, and before the evil but necessary secrets of the past could be faced with sufficient courage and re-learned, there would be only mouldering ruin.

Thus taught his instructors.

Therefore, this procedure and that technique are to be protected and held inviolate if men are to be kept from savagery! Remember the Holocaust, Cadet! *This* is the proven way!

But the something in him that he had never been able to suppress—whatever it was that had made him build his vehicle despite his father's warnings to silence—that "something" was again to be his downfall, even among those who had been his rescuers.

"A point of final clarification, if I may, Majtech B-Haaq." A uniformed Coltech of the Director Gentech's panel had spoken without rising from his seat. "You have charged that past difficulties with the accused have involved actual *challenge* of the instructorship under which he was assigned?"

"At times, Sire, challenge that has been tantamount to outright refusal to accept certain standard procedures of operation, accompanied in each instance with the claim by the accused that his own would be a superior procedure! There was, you may recall, the affair of the burned out variable thrust transformer, a standard instructional problem. Cadtech Kane argued that replacement of a specific fuse in a specific circuit was ample solution, rather than replacement of the entire complement of fuses, which has of course been standard procedure in such an instance for two full centuries. And again—"

"That quite fully answers my question, Majtech, thank you."

Then another moment of awful silence—the awful timelessness of deliberation.

Jon Kane could feel the cold perspiration that made his well cut cadet uniform tunic damp and clinging. He tried to repress a shiver, to stand as completely motionless as the men before him sat.

"Majtech B-Haaq." It was the Director Gentech himself who spoke. His words were slow, measured, and spoken in a voice which might have been that of a man twenty years his junior. Gentech Starn, at the age of ninety, was still a strong man and a strong leader, and his name had been synonymous with the three letters ITA and the interstellar authority for which they stood for every one of the sixty years since his father, Director Gentech before him, had met death on one of Sol System's cold, hostile outplanets.

"Sire."

"You have prosecuted with excellence. However, may I suggest that I am yet to be wholly satisfied in this matter. Your accused must have admirable potentialities as a technical officer, or he would not have been selected for training, nor would such effort have been expended to obtain him, at the very outset. Whatever challenges, as you charge he has made, could not, then, have been totally irresponsible ones. And it has been a long time since there has been technological challenge of the Intergalactic Technical Alliance!" A hardly discernible smile touched the faded, withering lips, and Kane thought he had detected a momentary lightness in the last words they had spoken. "So it is my suggestion, Majtech—and gentlemen of this panel, that final decision hinge upon the success or failure of the experiment which the accused is held to have proposed, and which he so adamantly refuses to desert!"

"But—Sire, I submit that Cadtech Kane has admitted, by his own words as well as his actions, his guilt in this matter! He has freely confessed to each of the charges; has defiantly and openly held that his experiment will succeed, and has refused retraction of his stand in this very council chamber—"

"Our decision, Majtech B-Haaq, in cognizance of the folly of unduly wasting an otherwise competent cadet technician on the mining planets unless justified to our complete satisfaction, is that the experiment be allowed to proceed! This hearing is therefore adjourned!"

THERE were no others in the workshop to which he had been assigned. He was to work on his drive unit alone, Majtech

B-Haaq had ordered, and of course the reason was obvious. One young heretic was enough.

But if the glittering, finely-tooled object that rested on the long workbench before him was wrong and would not work? Yet he knew that it would! Mounted in a standard model spacetender, the drive unit which he'd devised would easily produce five times the speed and power, would consume less than half as much atomic fuel, would quadruple range, last twice as long.

It had taken slightly over a month to build; B-Haaq had grudgingly granted him all the time he estimated he'd need, but he'd hurried nonetheless—sixteen, sometimes eighteen hours at a stretch.

Yet the work had not been difficult. As he'd tooled and formed the simple, compact parts and watched his creation grow steadily from one day to the next, he had marvelled that certain self-evident innovations of design had not been adopted years before. It was not, he knew, that he was so much cleverer than they! Rather, it was almost as though such improvement had been deliberately avoided. And ITA space drives had remained cumbersome, overly-complex and unwieldy.

He straightened from his work. It was done, and the ships of the Intergalactic Technical Alliance would be caught up a solid century at least! He had now only to request an installation crew of labortechs, supervise for a few hours, and then—

"Master Kane!"

The startled cadtech snapped to immediate attention. It was B-Haaq. He had entered the workshop without signalling.

"Yes Sir!"

"I must make a report of your progress to the Gentech's headquarters." He spoke levelly, but Kane could feel the resentment in his voice.

"My work is completed, sire. I was at this moment preparing to summon a labortech installation crew, and to supervise—"

"I'll do the summoning, Master Kane! And the supervision! I don't believe it necessary to remind you that even if you have refused your commission, I accepted my own quite some time ago! This mechanism is completed, you say?"

"Yes, sire. I hope that I shall be permitted to pilot—"

B-Haaq was bending over the gleaming unit, his face expressionless. "No one is to pilot the craft, Master Kane," he said without looking up. "We of the ITA still know something of remote radio control, I assure you. You will work from Navigation Information Center, at controls already set up there for the purpose."

Kane kept his silence, and tried to keep his disappointment from showing in his face.

"Tell me, Master Kane—" and the Section Overseer had straightened and was now facing him squarely again, "—have you ever been told why you were picked—I believe a better word is rescued—from that hell planet of yours in Procyon for the ITA?"

"Yes, sire, I was, during basic indoctrination," Kane answered.

"That is fortunate, then. You know, at least, that we thought we could make a technician out of you! Report to the NIC room in one hour, Master Kane! Your little show will be all ready by then. You're dismissed!"

DIRECTOR GENTECH STARN himself, flanked by three of his closest aides, entered the NIC room.

They took standing positions behind Kane. And behind them, at the prescribed distance of respect, were grouped the ship's full complement of Section Overseers and instructors. Kane stood before the central nav-screen and its compact banks of controls.

Suddenly a red blinker flashed, dully reflected from the myriad tiers of sensitive mechanism which lined the room's curving bulkheads. He pressed a stud, and the screen before him came alive. Blackness, studded with the tiny white-hot sparks that were the suns of the Milky Way. And then suddenly a larger one which moved swiftly.

And then he was no longer aware of the electric silence that engulfed him, and there was no sensation, no thought but the singular sensation and thought which co-ordinated nerve and sensitively disciplined muscle; which directed his fingers unerringly across the studded control-banks and guided the streaking spacetender as surely as though they reached into Space and touched it, hold-

ing it by their own strength to its wide, curving course.

Relay gauges hummed and clicked softly; velocity and power readings registered, and nav-grid traced the fleet craft's path through the void.

Then Kane spoke. "Sires, as you can see, the spacetender in which my drive unit has been installed is now proceeding at what is usually considered to be topmost velocity and with what would normally be maximum power output for such a craft." He could feel his voice waver at first, and then with the sound of it and the reassuring feeling of the control studs beneath his fingertips, it strengthened, became firm. And he knew they were listening. Listening as though it were the Gentech himself who spoke. Then he summoned up all his courage. "I will now," he said, "accelerate the tender to treble its present speed, while increasing power output by approximately six-fold. If you will watch the central group of gauges carefully, please."

He jammed his finger down on a white, diamond shaped stud, and his breath clogged in his throat.

The screen followed the tender's course faithfully. The gauges chuckled and hummed.

And then the blackness was torn open with a coruscating, soundless flash, and the tender was in an instant nothing but a white cloud of rapidly dissipating atoms!

No! . . . No! . . . No!

There was no sound from behind him, but he knew that the huge chamber was quickly and silently emptying.

He did not turn from the screen. It was black again, now, relieved only by the tiny sparks that were the stars.

He did not know how long he stood there or how long he watched. Minutes—or even hours, perhaps. He knew only that there was an uncontrollable thing of rage and disbelief and helpless frustration seething bitterly inside him that would not abate, and with it was a crazy jumble of thoughts that made no sense at all.

He heard a man behind him then. It was B-Haaq.

"A pity you've learned your lesson so late," he heard the Majtech say. "*Mine slave!*"

III

JON KANE'S compact quarters seemed more restricted than ever; the curved bulkheads closed in upon him, and he was an animal in a trap. Waiting, he thought, for the slaughter. He knew it would be that. He would not have a chance when his trial resumed. There would be no way of tricking B-Haaq into admitting the thing he'd done, and no matter how the charge were uttered, it would be the charge of a prisoner, and would fall on less than unsympathetic ears. And of course with the spacetender so many blasted atoms adrift in Infinity, there could be no proof.

Why did B-Haaq hate him so? This was more than an officer simply doing his duty as he saw it—this was singular, personal hatred! But why?

He glanced for the tenth time in thirty minutes at his wristtime; the sleeping-period was half over, and he knew he would probably be awake for the remaining half. And the remaining half was so slow in going. If only there were something he could *do*. If he could only build another unit and install it himself! If—

Fully clothed, he sat up in his bunk. Hesitated only a moment, then crossed the small cubicle to its single narrow hatch. The simple time-lock that secured it was all that held him prisoner—a traditional matter of form, since any skillful mastertech could, with a length of slender wire, applied in the right places. . . .

The plan took shape in his mind in the few moments it took him to render the sensitive mechanism useless; it had been rigged for alarm, but the alarm never sounded. In a moment he was on the catwalk.

He strode swiftly and silently, the fine length of wire still in one hand. He almost passed the seldom used hatch when he came to it, so cleanly was it hinged into its bulkhead. But he knew what was beyond it, and the knowledge seemed to hasten his skillful fingers. Within moments, the hatch opened soundlessly, and he was inside the chamber. The Flagship's armory.

Were it not for the labortech artificers, the neatly stacked weapons would have been rusted, useless things long since. "For use ONLY on alien, unknown and possibly

hostile planets" the ITA regulations read. It was a rule that applied throughout the entire fleet, and as far as he knew, had been all but forgotten. For within the scope of the ITA's interest there no longer were any "alien, unknown and possibly hostile planets," and on the rest, arms had been unnecessary to the ITA for centuries. For it had a far more powerful weapon than any it could devise of metal. It had merely to refuse its services for awhile.

A smile spread slowly across Jon's face as he began a selective examination of the weapons. Maybe he'd even find a longbow! Lord, here was even a device that propelled small projectiles by means of explosive cartridges! These things had been unnecessary for centuries!

But slowly, the smile changed to a worried frown. First one weapon and then another he discarded, and then another.

But he must find one! And then he could make B-Haaq admit what he'd done.

It was a muffled, metallic sound but it registered on his consciousness and he whirled. Even as he came erect the lights glared suddenly at full strength; whoever had so silently stepped in behind him had lost no time in finding the bulkhead transformer stud.

It was the sleep period duty officer, and a hastily snatched hand gun was levelled at him.

And even in the sudden brilliance of the lights, he recognized her. Lenantech Deanne Starn, the Gentech's niece, herself!

"Get your hands up, Cadet!"

"Why? The thing you've got in your hand hasn't held a charge since Hanna grew teeveeyes." He grinned. Even in the white glare, she wasn't hard to look at. There were a number of stories that had circulated their way through the cadet quarters, but then. Most rumors had it that B-Haaq himself was the lucky man, and there were few others that held differently. Those of the ship's women who didn't have the slender figure, the crisp cut pale blonde hair or the wide blue eyes and fine features and quick, alert mind that so typified the family of Starn were never too badly off, for that reason. For to the men aboard, she was B-Haaq's, and that was the end of it!

6—Planet—March

She seemed not to have heard what he said.

"You're Cadtech Kane, aren't you? Do you think this additional charge of attempted unlawful procurement of arms is going to help your case to any extent?"

"I did think so, yes."

"You're as good as in the mines now. And I don't follow your logic. Don't move a muscle!"

"You might as well throw that thing away, Lenantech, it's no good. I'm still looking for one that is, myself. And if you're going to report me, I'm certainly not going to try to stop you. That'd just get me in even deeper, wouldn't it?"

Her features were white, motionless. Only her wrist moved; she deflected the muzzle of her weapon but a fraction of an inch and squeezed the trigger.

The gun clicked emptily, and that was all it did.

"You—"

"I nothing. Just told you. Look, Lenantech, people have shot at me with longbows, hauled me almost naked through the deserts of Prokyfive, beat me with lashes, and sabotaged me. Now I've had enough."

"You're not making any sense to me, Master Kane. You have just one minute to get out of here, or—"

"You mean you wouldn't report me if I did?"

She flushed. "I didn't say that. But since you're already as good as—"

"That's just it. But if I can find what I'm after here, I just might be able to change that a little. That spacetender of mine didn't fall apart out there because it wouldn't work! Not by a damn sight it didn't!"

"Be careful what you say, Master Kane!"

"Truth's the truth, isn't it? Even if I can't prove a certain Majtech wanted to see me flop and get thrown out of here badly enough to ruin my experiment? Maybe I asked too many questions; or answered too many the wrong way. Your guess is as good as mine. But instead of logical explanations or fair evaluations, I got a court-martial instead. Maybe you can tell me, Lenantech—why replace an entire distributor head assembly on a farm tractor when replacement of the rotor may be all that's necessary?

Why a new spark plug when all that is required is the resetting of its points? Why stick to a logarithm with a base of 10 when other bases could often make an entire mathematical operation far more simple? And if a man can build you a better drive unit, why smash it for him and discredit him?"

"I think the court took ample cognizance of those questions, Master Kane." She had lowered the weapon, and had even come a step closer to him. And for a moment, he thought that he had seen a flash of interest in her eyes.

"I know what the court did. But you can think as well as anybody else, can't you? What are your answers, ma'am?"

"This is hardly the place for a history lecture, Master Kane. But the ITA was formed of those few technicians who managed to escape the wrath of the war weary civilizations who turned upon them and upon men called scientists, whatever they were, as those to blame for system-wide destruction and wholesale death. You have been taught that. Many of their methods and much of their knowledge was lost. You have been taught that also. But it was those methods and that knowledge which saved them from destruction once, and made the ITA possible. What was not lost is sacred knowledge, Master Kane, and for only a few to know, and for those few to guard militantly lest one jot more of it become lost!"

"You're right. I've been taught all that. But you still haven't answered my questions! Suppose I told you I could do a Project AA in less than an hour's time, and guarantee it good for five hundred years. What would you say to that?"

He saw her eyes widen. "That is sheer nonsense and you know it, cadet! A double-A takes six solid months except in event of emergency, and is good for fifty years at maximum! Why, even the geniuses of those ancient war years who were forced to conceive and devise the Project could not have done better—"

Jon grinned again. "Some day maybe I'll show you, Lenantech! Me and the planets and you! But you better get going and report me before you get yourself in a jam—"

"Yes, indeed she had!"

THE girl blanched, and Jon felt sick. It was B-Haaq. It was always B-Haaq. Standing now in the hatchway, black eyes blazing.

Suddenly Jon felt something snap inside him; suddenly the delicate mechanisms of his brain which had kept reason and desire on a tautly balanced plane of stability failed him, and frustrated rage was in his throat again, and the blinding white of the exploding spacetender swam again before his eyes. He felt his right arm sweeping up over his head, felt the weight of something at its end, and then felt the arm go down, relieved suddenly of the weight.

The heavy hand gun flew straight at B-Haaq, and glanced from his head.

The man slumped, fell almost soundlessly.

And for a full second, it seemed to Jon that time had stopped. The girl was motionless, the look of disbelief frozen on her features, and there was a numbing paralysis gripping his own body.

Then he was in motion, and it was an automatic thing, his arms and legs moving swiftly as though fully independent of his brain. Within seconds he had pulled the unconscious B-Haaq into a far corner of the armory and covered him with his own cloak of office. He pulled a double rack of neuro-rifles in front of the shapeless heap, and then before she could pull away from him he had the girl by one arm and was propelling her toward the hatchway.

"Kane, what do you think—"

"No time to talk, ma'am. These lights have been on too long—somebody's going to notice the energy consumption in General Control any minute now. Besides which, B-Haaq saw you with me, and heard me telling you to get going and report me. So if I didn't kill him—"

"You're crazy! He wouldn't—"

Jon tightened his grip, looked straight into her eyes. "You know he would, ma'am. If only because he hated me so much, and he found you with me. We've got to get going."

"You let me go!" With a quick wrench, she twisted free of him. "You're forgetting, aren't you, that no matter where in the ship you go it will be only a matter of time before you're found? And if they can give you anything worse than the mines—"

"All right then, stay if you want to! Go ahead and gamble that our friend's either dead or has a forgiving nature hidden away somewhere—the only thing I'm sure about is that he didn't blow up *all* the ship's space-tenders."

"You'll be overhauled in no time!"

"Ten minutes' work and I can triple the speed of any one of those buckets. You coming, or not?"

He turned from her, ducked swiftly through the hatchway and chose a port-side ramp that would carry him up to the Maintenance deck. There would be at least one tender berthed there in good working condition.

He flattened himself against the ramp wall as he neared its end; listened. Nothing. Maintenance was just sitting around as usual, and during the sleep period, there'd be only a skeleton crew.

In the semi-darkness, he reached up, felt his fingers brush along the curved, smooth ceiling of the gently inclined passage. There; an emergency pressure duct, designed to open automatically in the event of malfunction of the ship's atmospheric regulators. Emergency pressure could be built up through the ducts in the event of any sudden fall of more than eight ounces per square inch; and would be instantly released should it mount more than three pounds above. All he had to do was jam this single duct to the "excess" position and hold his breath.

It was like picking a lock with his bare fingers, and they felt like fat sausages. And then he had it.

There was a sudden scream of escaping air about him, and he plunged forward.

Somewhere an alarm clanged, and he knew that within moments the skeleton maintenance crew would be suited and pouring in on the ramp with everything it had, from Geiger counters to baling wire. Already, even above the near deafening alarms, he could hear the pounding of their feet.

He dashed for it.

Reached the berth, and there was a tender snuggled into it, ready and waiting.

He had the small craft's outer lock opened within seconds.

"KANE!"

He whirled, even as the inner lock was sliding open. It was Deanne Starn. And

she was running toward him.

The inner lock was open, and Jon pushed her through it, and then had himself strapped before the miniature control console almost before the blinker winked to signal that the outer and inner lock ports were sealed.

He waited a nerve wracking twenty seconds before the Flagship's flank yawned open, and then jammed the firing studs down with his accelerators full open.

The tender leaped from its berth like a wounded thing, and for a moment Space spun sickeningly, and Jon's eyes blurred from the unprecedented take-off acceleration. Might as well break all the rules in the book.

Then the stabilizers were taking over, and things began to straighten out. He flipped the craft's automatics in, unbuckled his straps and got weightlessly underway toward the tender's aft-section.

"Kane, where are you going? Where are we going?"

"I'm going to diddle with this tub until that big barge back there can't pick us up for Spacedust. And we're going to a little backwater planetoid that the ITA only gets to once every thirty years or so. They used to call it Titan."

"A satellite of one of the Sol planets, isn't it?"

"You're coming up with a lot of smart answers all of a sudden."

"Can you—can you find it? All by yourself?"

"My father was born right next door. I can find it."

IV

EARTH trembled.

She shook like a palsied animal, and great fissures rent her thick hide as tidal waves lashed like gigantic hammers at the coastlines of her continents and mercilessly overran a host of the jewel-like islets that studded her vast oceans.

Her artificial satellites had long since come crashing down, and her natural moon teetered threateningly in its age-old course. Great, jagged chunks broke loose as the barren mass of rock circled perilously close to de Roche's Limit.

Some of the lower, sturdier buildings in the cities which dotted her wide continents were yet intact, and in the largest, the capital city itself, a number of the broad, deep-laid malls and thoroughfares were still at least partially passable.

But Senator Martin Stine, Conservative Socialist representing the state of Penn-York, had trouble keeping his temper in check nonetheless. It was temper aroused as much from the anxiety of deep rooted fear as from the irritation of trying to guide his pneumocar through the debris-littered avenue leading to the capitol, and the thought jittered again through his mind that he should have taken one of the overheads even though some of them were sagging dangerously in places.

But he hadn't taken one, and there was less than a quarter-mile to go. If he hadn't been adding so indiscriminately of late to his normally 195-pound, six-foot two-inch frame he could've parked the damn car and run the rest of the way. Only a block or so yet.

And at this session, the fur was going to fly for sure if the planet hung together long enough for it to even get underway. He'd warned them the last time about the Tinkers. Deaf. Everybody.

His heavy face was red when he at length arrived in front of the capitol mainramp. He didn't wait for a robotparker to come and take over, but simply stopped his vehicle in its tracks and abandoned it where it stood. And despite the extra pounds he'd recently put on, he moved with an almost feline grace up the broad, inclining ramp, the anger steadily mounting in him.

He entered the vast chamber and took his seat, just as the muted roar of private, nervous conversation was broken by the tri-diannouncer.

"Gentlemen, the President-General of the United Earth Republics!"

Silence. Then the crashing noise of a thousand men getting to their feet. A small, gray-looking man with a prematurely bald head crossed the front of the great chamber flanked by his Secretaries of State and Defense, then mounted the podium alone.

And the emergency session of the Senior Congress of the United Earth Republics was begun.

SENATOR MARTIN STINE was the tenth man to be recognized.

He rose quickly and plucked the jeep-mike from its recessed spot in his desktop.

"So far," he began, omitting even to begin his remarks with the traditional salutation to the President and the group as a whole, "I have heard ten recommendations for procedure in the present crisis, and each one has been about as jelly-kneed as the one before it! There's one solution to this thing and only one. If we don't want this planet to be scattered to the four corners of Space within the next 72 hours we must get Project AA underway and damn quick! I've been informed that there is a Tinker ship within thirty hours' flight of this system. If we act now, and call them in as we should've, on an ESR, five years ago, we still might be able to get out of this one with whole skins. Some of us, anyway. Gentlemen, the casualty lists as of an hour ago weren't very encouraging."

"Will the Senator from Penn-York yield for a question?"

Stine's cold blue eyes snapped. "Yield for one minute to the Senator from Texamerica."

"The ITA effected a Project AA for this system about eleven years ago, did they not? And have answered exactly seven Emergency Service Requests in the last one hundred twenty years, have they not? In view of such frequent assistance, it would seem—"

"What the Senator from Texamerica really means is that if the ITA had to do a double-A for the second time in eleven years, the reflection on their prestige would make things a little gummy in some quarters —isn't it?" A gavel rapped sharply. Stine threw a quick glance at the section reserved for native Earth political representatives of the ITA, and he saw that one was already on his feet demanding recognition.

"I yield for all the time you need! Go ahead!" Stine sat down, his youthful looking face mottled with tension.

"I may remind the Senator from Penn-York that the ITA has some one hundred twelve other worlds in addition to this planet to look after! And as far as it is concerned, nuisance planets are better off dead! If our torsion screens were inoperable; if there were no other way to hold the planet

together until the next scheduled visit nine years from now, then perhaps an ESR would be in order. But since it is obvious that this system's Gravity-Justifier is only in temporary disorder, and was designed to be self-repairing, an ESR for a double-A is simply out of the question. I repeat. As far as the ITA is concerned, a nuisance planet—"

"Yes, and that's just the stranglehold you've got on all of your hundred and thirteen worlds!" Stine had leapt to his feet, and the President-General's gavel banged furiously, but he paid it no heed at all. "Be good boys and do what we tell you and leave us alone while we're busy playing God or we'll let you go back to stone axes and caves—that's what you're trying to say, isn't it?" The gavel clamored deafeningly through the President-General's lectern-mike, and the gray, bald man was now standing himself. But there was a sudden surge of voices and a scattered applause throughout the entire chamber that had begun quickly to swell, drowning out even Stine's own voice. Then died slowly, so that his words could be heard again. "Playing God might be all right if you can prove all the time to all the people that you've got all the answers to all the problems! But it might not be so easy if you begin to lose your touch; lose some of the answers! I hope the ITA representative isn't trying to tell us that the organization for which he works is no longer capable of repairing a Gravity-Justifier so that it will keep the planets in their orbits where they belong! Or am I right?"

"That is a preposterous accusation and—" The gavel thundered. "—and I demand its retraction immediately!"

"Friend, I was born on this planet the same as you were but I work for it. I'm not standing idly by to see it destroyed because your buddies are afraid to admit they might be slipping a little and don't want it to show! I—" Thunderous applause. Half the chamber was on its feet, now, and even without the jeepmikes the cheers would have been deafening. "I say, Mr. President, if we're to believe the ITA is what it pretends to be—a technological service organization dedicated to the galactic welfare—it be called in immediately for a Project AA, and, if it refuses, that it be publicly de-

nounced by this government as no longer competent in that capacity!"

When Stine sat down this time, the ovation that followed his words left the chief executive little choice.

A vote was called, and Stine realized that somehow, his laborious weeks and months of propagandizing and mass proselytization had at last taken root.

It had been comforting to know, at least, that had he failed, there was a well-appointed, powerful space-cruiser waiting for him at a secret place in the mountains to the north. It was still comforting to know. Because the Tinkers would have to come, now, if only to save face. And, of course, they wouldn't be able to deliver.

And then—

He stirred restlessly in his seat as the vote was being tallied, was nearly thrown from it once as a great tremor shook the massive building; excited knots of men who had begun crowding the aisles were bowled in scrambled confusion to the floor. And Stine smiled a tight, small smile to himself. Even Nature was doing her bit.

A hurrying page boy brushed past his desk in the crowded aisle, and he suddenly felt something small and hard pressed into his palm. He knew what it was by the feel of it, but it would have to wait until he could leave.

He did not have to wait long. The President-General himself announced the result of the vote, and within the next half hour an ESR would be on its way to the nearest Tinker ship. There were a few cries of "Railroad!" and "—demand a recount!" amid the noisy babble of the adjourning session, but Stine was already on his way.

A second tremor brought him to his knees at the main exit of the great chamber; it stopped the post-mortems cold, and sent the august body of Senior Congressmen scurrying for other exits themselves, and Stine's early departure went unnoticed, even by waiting newsmen who had themselves been scattered unceremoniously half the length of the wide exit corridor.

The pressurelift lowered him quickly to his basement offices.

A panel slid silently from his impressive Martian drokii-wood desk. Then it was but a matter of slipping the tiny microfilm spool

from the flat, coin-sized container that the page boy had so carefully delivered to him and inserting it in the compact projector long enough to completely memorize the coded symbols.

Then he destroyed the strip and container together.

Almost casually he plucked the comphone from its cradle, but flicked a tiny stud that would keep the televideo blank.

He dialed, waited.

"Newton? For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The answer is yes."

He hung up.

V

SATURN pulsed palely in the void before them as though painted in three dimensions by a master artist. Kane pointed through the duraglass conning bubble at the spectacle. Ringed planets were rare, even in the wide fastnesses of Space which the ITA commanded with its far-flung fleet. And off to the huge, banded planet's lee swung the largest of its satellites, long since made livable by the now forgotten cleverness of the Solmen.

"Titan?" Deanne asked.

"It is," Jon said.

"May I ask you why you decided on it? There seem to be others. Full sized planets, even." She was standing close to him now, watching the silent beauty of the Spacescape as though, for the moment, she had forgotten all else. Jon looked at her, and wondered. Why, really, had she come with him.

"Before the Wars," he began, "Solmen made of that satellite their first project in conversion; battled it from a dead, frozen wasteland to a fertile, life sustaining oasis in Space. Back in the days before the Scientists were eliminated and the technicians shot down where they stood. Back when spaceships didn't even look like spaceships—clumsy, triple-sphered affairs—but they worked. I don't think the Solmen left on Titan ever quite forgot how it felt that day their last link with Sol III was severed; their last ship destroyed by the mobs that came from the mother planet despite the feeble resistance they were able to put up. Last

link except for the ITA, that is, but of course they didn't know there'd even be an ITA in those days. Things were pretty rough for awhile."

"How do you know all this? According to what is taught in the history classes—" She let her sentence trail off and suddenly looked him full in the face. And comprehension stirred in her eyes. "You're not—not some erratic, mutant genius, then, as B-Haaq told my uncle."

"Hardly, Deanne, hardly. You've guessed right, I think, I got ahold of some old books once. That's all. In some ways, I know more than the ITA has forgotten in two hundred years. And that's why I picked Titan. I could be wrong, of course. But of all places where resentment might still smoulder, even after so long a time, Titan seemed like the place. The Solmen there knew what science and technology could accomplish for men's benefit; they knew best of all because they had helped accomplish the miracle of creating a living planet out of a hunk of sterile rock. And because they had, many of them were slaughtered, as were the other technicians and scientists in the dark days following the Holocaust. Somehow I don't think they've forgotten. And that's why I think they'll help us."

"You mean there's—you mean the ITA is actually resented? That's impossible! There are great welcomes for us wherever one of our ships lands! Why, were it not for us, civilization would—"

"You're forgetting, Deanne, that those technicians that were able to save their hides during the dark days, and who later became the ITA, were running away; beating a hasty retreat, a strategic withdrawal, whatever you want to call it. They withdrew into a pretty impregnable shell of their own, from which, I might add, they've never even tried to come out. The Space Tinkers, they're occasionally called—"

"Space Tinkers!"

"Sure. Descendants of armorers of the past. Be glad you're not called gypsies! You're getting the benefit of the doubt. At least it's pretty well realized that the ITA can trace its ancestry to *real* technicians!" Kane grinned at her, and fleetingly thought how much the quick flush of anger added to the beauty of her patrician features.

"Anyway, for Tinker eyes and ears, there's never been anything but welcome and praise wherever they've landed. Nothing but, and very militantly so, too, I'll tell you. Nobody wants to die when Tinker medicine can save them, to freeze when Tinker repaired heating plants can keep them warm in Winter. But underneath—underneath, the power the ITA holds over the very livelihood of civilization is pretty painfully felt."

"But—but we are not dictators, Kane! That is a lie! We have never taken advantage—"

"True enough, and that's all on the credit side. I don't think the ITA has ever had any other motive than keeping itself safe. Making sure that it would never suffer the near-extinction that its forbears did. But in so doing, you see, they've had to work themselves into a pretty commanding position. And they've succeeded. They've denied technical learning and training to all the planets, under penalty of forfeiture of the very necessary periodic technical service upon which the planets depend to retain the comforts of civilized living—"

"I realize all that. Where, after all, would any of the planets be if the Gravity-Justifiers finally gave out for lack of proper maintenance? At least the history that I was taught said that during the Wars, planetesimals and even whole planets were annihilated in an effort to so upset a system's gravitational balance that the resulting upheavals would mean death to every living thing in that system. But there were some technicians—"

"Scientists, Deanne."

"Well, whatever they were, who were able to devise mechanisms to float in orbits of their own, warping Space in such a way as to create an artificial balance. Those Geesays saved billions of lives, and after the bloody reaction from the Wars and the men who invented them were killed, who else was left to keep them in working order? I should think people would—"

"Thank the ITA?"

"Well, yes, of course." There was a defiant look on her face, but Jon Kane was grinning. Saturn hulked far to their starboard side, now, and the ship's automatics were bringing them in dead on Titan. The planetoid was growing visibly bigger by the minute, and the other Ring of its primary

was casting the interior of the spacetender in weird, vari-colored shadow.

"If you were out there in a suit and somebody else was holding your oxytank, controlling just how much air you could have, how would you feel about him? Would you feel like thanking him for letting you have air to breathe?"

"Well, I—"

"You'd keep a damned close eye on him. And if he started telling you what to do and when to do it or he'd suffocate you, you'd get to hating his guts even if he behaved like the spirit of Christ Himself!"

"Who taught you all this, Master Kane? Who is this Christ?"

"Look, Deanne, a grown man should be capable of thinking for himself! But before you go getting sore at me again, just answer this one about the guy holding your oxytank—suppose, somehow, he forgot, little by little, how to work the valve—and realized that there was a chance you might find out about it? He wouldn't be in the pilot's seat anymore, would he?"

"He wouldn't be able to shut me off, if that's what you mean," she said quickly, going along now with his analogy. "But he wouldn't be able to give me more air in a hurry if I needed it, either!"

"And so then what happens?"

The girl's face was suddenly grim. For a long moment, Kane could see, she was thinking, and thinking hard. And then she said at length, "Is that where you come in?"

"If I can give you back your tank of air, I guess it is."

"And if you can't?"

"Then I'm afraid the one in the worst trouble will be the guy who's holding it," Jon answered.

And then he turned from her, reseated himself before the control panels and kicked out the automatics.

In minutes, he had the tender swung to, and was climbing down his jet to one of Titan's largest spaceports.

It was still a bright planet, and its artificial atmosphere, islands and great lakes were as his father had described them. Titan was, indeed, an oasis in the cruel coldness of the void.

He landed the tender with scarcely a jar, and then wordlessly, he and Deanne opened

the small craft's locks and stepped out on the tarmac to greet the landing party that had been alerted to receive them.

Two tall, cloaked men strode forward.

"Jon Kane and Deanne Starn?"

"Greetings—" Kane began.

"You will come with us," one of them said. His short red beard seemed to glisten in the sun-like atmospheric light. "You are under arrest!"

THE small, air-conditioned cell was clean, at least, and a far cry from those on Procyon V. There was even a low tablet on which to lie, and Jon sprawled himself out upon it. He wished, vaguely, that they hadn't separated him from the girl. She was a pretty thing—and, had brains. Between the two of them they might've figured a way out, but alone it was like beating your head against a carbonite wall.

He'd been as wrong as a man could get about the Solmen on Titan, all right. The security police who'd booked them and brought them here hadn't said much, but it took little enough intelligence to reason that the Tinker Flagship, having discovered that the tender wasn't to be overtaken, had simply broadcast an all-planets bulletin. He'd been a fool to put down at a regular spaceport. He'd just walked straight into it. And now it was simply a matter of waiting for either another tender or the Flagship itself to come and get them. He wasn't sure what would happen to Deanne, but for himself, a murder charge, surely.

That accounted for the cell they'd assigned him to. It was unlike the Proky jails in more ways than one; as escape-proof as the tomb itself. Kane even had the feeling that the cell was watching him.

He rolled over on his back, examined the rivetless steel ceiling with his eyes. And all the walls and the floor were the same, save for the tiny vents at the far edge of the ceiling for air circulation, and the almost microscopically fine lines in the near wall that outlined the foot-thick cell door.

He surveyed the walls, ceiling and floor again. And the only opening was the air duct, far too small for a man to crawl through, even without its solid looking louvres.

Suddenly, Kane remembered the ruse he

had employed aboard the Flagship. Instantly he was on his feet. He hauled the pallet beneath the tiny grilled spot in the ceiling, and standing on it, was barely able to touch the louvres. The Solmen of Titan grew taller than those of Terra. He had stripped himself to the waist, and folded the firm fabric of his Cadtech tunic into a solid wad. Then held it against the air vent with all the strength of his fingers until his arms ached!

The cubicle grew stuffy, and sweat trickled maddeningly down across his bared ribs.

HE RELAXED the muscles of his arms just as a faint draft flitted across his back. The door was sliding silently open behind him!

He was through it almost before the wadded tunic he had dropped hit the floor behind him.

He kept moving with all the strength that was in him down the long, wide corridor.

But there were no guards. Peculiar.

Suddenly a strange vibration shook corridor floor. Probably something in the planetoid's artificial gravity rectifier that needed looking after. Lord, if the ITA took care of the rectifier the way it did the air conditioner alarm, everybody'd soon be floundering in the normal, unpleasantly-slight gravitation of the tiny planetoid. A man would be lucky if he weighed forty pounds!

The corridor trembled again, this time more violently; it threw him momentarily off balance, and he could not regain it before the next one hit and sent him sprawling.

He struggled to his knees, and there was a terrible rending sound above him. He looked up. A jagged rent was splitting the corridor even as he watched! A 'quake of some kind.

He paused for a moment, catching his breath, trying to think. And then suddenly there was the sound of running feet and a guard commander's voice booming in a resounding echo down the smooth corridor sides.

"Man the control boards. Let 'em out!"

Doors slid open at every side of him; some were already buckled and opened only partially, but the men inside got out, and within seconds the corridor was full of running, howling humanity from every colony in the system.

Jon almost bowled a guard off his feet. He grabbed the man at the shoulder, thumbs digging in at the painful points.

"Talk! What the seven hells is going on?"

"Run, you fool! Let go! The Rings are coming in on us! The whole damn planetoid is starting to break up! Ow—damn you! It's the Geejay. Earth's been going to hell for over an hour now!"

"And they let it hit here without warning? ANSWER ME!"

"You crazy? Warp beams are only for the ITA. Old fashioned radio's all we've got, and it takes eighty minutes—"

"Thanks!" Jon released the desperate man and thrust him aside, fought his way back into the crowded corridor.

He had to get out of the building but he was trapped in this crazy mob.

Another tremor, this one worse than any of the rest, sent the choked corridor into a maelstrom of kicking, clawing confusion. And Jon was the first to see the small panel now blinking EMERGENCY EXIT, sliding slowly, grudgingly back against a bent frame.

He was through it first. He broke into an open prison yard where the squat, streamlined form of a jetgiro was parked. Crazy thing, jetgiro sitting that way in a prison yard, as though it were just waiting for somebody who'd be coming out the emergency exit. He bolted for it. Had to hurry—the others weren't far behind, and if they caught up he'd never get the thing into the air. They'd claw him down.

He took a quick look upward at the sky, and it seemed to be on fire. Even in the brightness of Titan's artificial daylight the hurtling particles from the disturbed rings flamed blindingly. Saturn itself filled half the sky, and even to the naked eye the great rings were flaring dangerously at the edges.

He got behind the controls of the giro just as the mob broke through the exit.

He prayed that the engines weren't too cold, and even as the durastone floor of the yard split jarringly beneath him and swallowed a dozen men, he punched the Lift stud and the small vehicle rose heavily into the air.

Cold, of course. No . . . engine-heat almost normal. Then—

"Sorry, Master Kane."

And that was all he heard. There was an awful, sudden pain in his head and then he felt nothing else.

VI

DEANNE saw the panel blinking EMERGENCY EXIT too late, and her momentary hesitation at the cross corridor spelled an abrupt finis to her desperate attempt. The lone guard who otherwise would never have seen her brought his springbow up with a look of dazed astonishment on his bearded features, and she froze.

"Don't—please!"

"How did you escape?" He moved closer, springbow was cocked taut.

"My—my cell door. For some reason it failed to shut properly, and I—I—"

"That is a likely story indeed, pretty one! Escapes are not made from this prison quite so easily! You come along with me . . . come on!"

His command ended in a sharp yell of surprise. The springbow clattered from his grasp as the corridor suddenly rocked crazily, and Deanne felt herself thrown bodily against the exit panel!

It slid back at her touch, and she was through it, and then thrown headlong as a second tremor wrenched her from her feet. The whole world seemed to be disintegrating around her.

She found strength somehow and ran again, trying vainly to keep her balance, to keep the pitching corridor floor beneath her feet. And then running toward her—God, another guard—

No! No, it was no guard! *And it couldn't be—*

He caught her, held her without a word.

"B-Haaq! B-Haaq—how—"

"Majtech B-Haaq to you from now on! Just on my way to your cell to take you back where you belong! And that upstart Kane! Only this might save me the trouble—"

He hauled her roughly after him into the open rampway which dipped gently into the wide parking yards. The ramp trembled, bucked beneath them but she somehow kept from falling.

"I—I thought you—Kane—"

"Thought he killed me, did you? He

came close enough, and he'll pay for it! Come along . . ."

They crossed the yards at a half run.

B-Haaq was hauling her up on the finstep, and then the outer lock was opening, and they were inside.

The small space craft rocked sickeningly on its mounts.

B-Haaq barked to his waiting pilot. "Up-ship, you fool! Do you want us wrecked before we're even underway?"

The grim faced labortech punched his studs almost before Deanne had secured herself in an ackseat, and then with a dangerous overload of power, the tender jumped free of the shuddering planetoid.

"B-Haaq—for the love of Pluto, what's happening—"

"Haven't you learned yet what it's like when a Geejay breaks down? Sol III has been taking this for over an hour. Fortunately for you planetary imbalance doesn't affect all bodies in a system simultaneously, or that piece of rock back there would be rubble by now . . ."

"Is there a Project AA underway yet?"

"Of course there is. The Flagship received a warp beam ESR from Sol III, and of course we dispatched a crew to take care of those nuisances immediately. One of our duties, after all . . ."

The girl unbuckled her ackseat straps and sat up straight. "You mean they had to call?"

"What do you expect, that we keep a constant watch on all these backwater planets—"

"According to Regulations—"

"A lot you know of Regulations, young woman! Do you realize what the charge against you is? And that the lives of two men were risked to bring you back in one piece?"

"All I know is that this system's Geejay was serviced only eleven Periods ago, and was supposed to be good for at least—"

"That will be enough of that, or you'll find yourself facing more than just loss of rank!"

She reddened. "What of the man Kane?" she asked.

"He's lucky," B-Haaq answered, grinning slowly. "He'll be killed down there before they finish the double-A job."

An alarm clanged in the ship, and it veered sharply on its automatics, dodging the hurtling masses of debris that were still being flung into Space from the Outer Ring of Saturn. Minutes passed before the labortech at the controls, face drained of color with the tension of watching for the first sign of failure of the automatics, was able to relax and set course outward toward the looming hulk that was Director Gentech Starn's Flagship, drifting slowly at the system's rim.

DEANNE paused on the catwalk, blended herself with its shadows. She had heard nothing. She knew every inch of the great Flagship as she knew the limited dimensions of her own quarters; knew the main traffic corridors and the hours of each cycle when traffic was at its height and at its ebb. And she knew the mazed web of maintenance catwalks as well.

Her orders had read "Confined to quarters pending disposition of the following charges—" but her Section Commander knew nothing of men like Kane, knew nothing of the fire that could touch a man's soul and ignite the rebellion that now blazed so brightly in her own. The chances were few that it would even occur to Coltech Q-Jaax that she could be anywhere but in her quarters. At any rate, that was her gamble, and it was far less desperate a one than that which Kane had taken for what he believed.

The conference chamber loomed below her in the gloom of the ship's cavernous mid-section, and it would not be difficult to locate one of the many pressure duct leads. But she would need to remove a small transition piece, and—no! What would Kane have done—simply extract a single, strategic machine screw, and *swing* the piece aside! It would save minutes. Hearing the men below would then be as simple as though she stood in the chamber with them.

And she must hear, must know what they planned. So that somehow, Jon, if he still lived, could know.

Within seconds she had swung from the narrow walk and dropped soundlessly atop the wide expanse of the chamber's metal ceiling. Quickly she estimated the area beneath which the main council table lay, then sought the duct nearest the spot. In only

seconds more, she was lying prone in the deep shadows, able to hear.

"—and to be quite blunt about it, I am genuinely worried . . ." It was her uncle. "My niece's extraordinary behavior can be discussed later, gentlemen. Right now this matter of the Gravity-Justifiers is of the most importance. First of all, Captech D-Yun, why was I not immediately notified of the perilous difficulty in Sol system? These people depend upon us for their very lives! Well?"

"There is no excuse, Sire."

"Yes, I think perhaps there is! If not excuse, then reason, at least! If my memory serves me correctly, it has been a scant eleven Periods since the Sol Gravity-Justifier was last serviced, a piece of work, gentlemen, that has in the past been valid for fifty at minimum! Was I, perhaps, to be kept from knowing that what work was performed eleven Periods ago was a failure?"

A tight pause. And then, "Certainly not, Sire," in a soft tone from D-Yun. "But these people have been such—well, nuisances. We have given them so much more than their share of service that sabotage of some sort naturally suggested itself. We had been in the process of analytical survey—"

"I'll have none of that, not from any of you! Sabotage indeed. Why, it is a matter of record that Sol is not the only system in which breakdown has occurred far ahead of schedule tolerance! Yes, I know that, too, gentlemen! There is another thing I know as well. I know that there is no sabotage. I know that my personal staff of copytechs has been overworked for a full period in an effort to keep the peoples of over twenty different star systems unaware of the major technical difficulties which have been increasingly frequent in each of the others! I know that propaganda, instead of technical skill, has been keeping the prestige of the Alliance intact! The fault cannot be laid to Captech D'Yun's saboteurs! It must be laid squarely at our own door step, gentlemen! For some reason which I would like to know, we have simply not been able to keep up. We are not the technicians our fathers were, and careful study will show that they were not technicians to match their fathers, nor they their fathers before them! Slowly but too surely, we are losing something! Why?"

DEANNE breathed shallowly, straining to hear every word.

"Perhaps, Sire, the efficiency of our Cadtech recruiting system could be improved. Although I admit, the planets have not been producing youths of the caliber of—"

"Bah! If anything, they're getting quicker-witted all the time! And we have had little trouble, from among twenty-one star systems in two galaxies, in obtaining the necessary periodic quota! Yet our new ships are not as good! Our number increases, but that is all! And mere number, by itself, is worthless!"

Another voice replied, but she could not identify it. "That might be traced, Sire, to the poorer quality of raw materials which the planets are obliged by law to furnish us at the scheduled intervals in return for our service—"

"That is starwash, and you know it! If anything, quality has improved, since the discovery of new mining planets. I can still read records, young man! Perhaps you are not fully acquainted with the Director whom you're attempting to deceive!"

"If, Sire, I may hark back for a moment to the question of sabotage . . ." A curious chill coursed the length of Deanne's slender back. That was B-Haaq speaking. "I suggest that in this particular instance, Captech D-Yun may well be correct. I speak in light of the renegade, Cadtech Kane. Prior to his capture on Titan, there is little telling to what lengths he may have gone for revenge, Sire. As a Fourth Period Cadtech, he knew Geejay co-ordinates for at least twelve systems, and he knew also upon what the power of the ITA depends—technical efficiency. If that were to be flagrantly misrepresented through such sabotage, ITA prestige and power would of course suffer, and Kane's thirst for revenge slaked. I think perhaps it is of paramount importance that we seek to discover where he might strike next! If, that is, he survived the disintegration of Titan."

A murmur went up, grew noisier, and Deanne felt herself holding her breath. Then there was her uncle's voice again—

"You use the word 'power' strangely, Majtech."

"Not at all strangely, Sire! Our technical excellence has made all planets completely



dependent upon us! You may say that it is not revenge that we seek, but only safety. You may say that if we do have power and prestige, it is only for self protection, so that what happened to our ancestors centuries ago may never again be repeated. All these things are true. But also true is the fact that power is power. We have it, for two galaxies depend upon us for the very life of their civilizations! It is Kane who would threaten it! To give it up, or to let it be so easily taken from us, is to make of ourselves the fools that Kane so confidently assumes us to be! Centuries of work and progress hang in the balance, gentlemen! If this Kane has escaped Titan, we must find him! And if he has not, then we must undo his work! We must, in short, show these planets who holds the whip-hand, first, last and always!"

There was a moment of silence. Then suddenly a swelling flow of voices lifted in approval, and there was scattered applause. And it did not quiet immediately when the Director Gentech spoke.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen. You must know that I thoroughly disapprove of the views that Majtech B-Haaq has just expressed, and I am certain that, upon a moment's self-examination, you will feel as I do. I have thought often of the man Kane, and have as often wondered how close he may have been to many truths which we have either overlooked or forgotten! However, in all fairness to the Majtech I will call for a vote. Those in favor of the Majtech's proposals to comb the Sol system for Cadtech Kane, and to assert the prestige of the ITA will ballot 'yea.' Those opposed will cast blank ballots."

Silence, then, and Deanne counted her heart beats, thought surely they must be loud enough now to be heard the length and breadth of the ship.

"—the ballots have been counted, gentlemen . . ." The deep voice was slow and deliberate as it always was—yet it seemed, somehow, too slow now, too deep. "Majtech B'Haaq's proposals are approved by a majority of—of one vote. We will therefore begin our search immediately, and will trust that I was also incorrect in my evaluation of our present technological efficiency. This session is now adjourned."

Director Gentech Starn had suffered the first overruling of his long career.

VII

THERE were hard, stinging sensations in his face. They pierced the infinity of darkness until somewhere in it they touched his naked nerves and the darkness receded, slowly and became a blinding light.

A space-suited figure was standing over him, and it held the limp form of an empty suit in one hand, and a hand-weapon in the other, and the weapon was extended toward him, butt first!

He could see the hard, beetle-browed face behind the sealed face piece of the helmet. The mouth was moving rapidly, but he could not hear.

Jon's head hurt, and the pain spread throughout his body when he moved to get his feet beneath him, stood up. Subconsciously he knew he was aboard a ship in Space; there was the subtle, rippling vibration so familiar to any man with Spacelegs, and there was the smell of pumped atmosphere and the curious feeling of artificial gravity.

He tried to think even as he took the suit shoved into his arms by the man who had brought him back to consciousness, and began climbing dazedly into it. A suit, inside a ship in which the atmosphere was perfectly breathable? A *ship*? Tinker? No—no ITA craft, even the newest, had such thick-looking bulkheads, or was equipped with suits of such peculiar design—hard to get into the thing, nothing was in its right place. But if not an ITA craft, then—but that was not possible!

He had no sooner gotten the helmet adjusted than the radiophones in it crackled.

"Snap it up, get that face plate sealed! Here, you may need this—" He had taken care of the face plate, and now the curiously fashioned hand weapon was pushed into his right hand.

"What—"

"There's half a hundred Tinkers out fumbling around with a Project AA. Things are letting up on the planets, but they still haven't got the damn thing fixed the way it should be . . . found us, though . . ."

"Us?" His tongue was still thick in his

mouth and it was difficult to talk, or even think of words to say.

"You'll find out about us later. But in about a minute more they'll be in range, and those Space cannon of theirs'll be whaling away at us for all they're worth. They'd be dead ducks if this bucket was equipped the way it should be . . ." The man cursed. ". . . but there's not enough E-blasters to go around yet, or I-drives either, and that's why we're going to be a big sieve in less time than it takes to tell it. I suppose it ain't your fault—"

"My fault? Last I knew—"

"Sorry if I slugged you too hard, but the boss said to be sure. Be sure, he says, and he sends us out in one of the first tanks we made instead of one of the new jobs! Sometimes, I—"

"No escape craft? No—"

"You kidding? We sit here and take it! We could take to the ports, but the power packs on these suits are no match for those space tenders of theirs. They'd pick us up sure. Me, I'd die ten times first!"

Jon tried to assimilate the information, tried to take it all in even as he struggled to gain back his full consciousness.

"Mind telling me where we are? Where we're headed? Why in hell I was shanghaied?"

"Right now, about two points spherical north-northwest of Jupiter, minus about twelve to the ecliptic. Where we're headed you'll find out, if we live through this. And you weren't shanghaied. Not all the way, anyway. You didn't think that alarm system stayed quiet all by itself, did you? Or that the jetgiro flew itself to where you found it? The boss is still going to be sore. We were supposed to put the net over two of you—"

So it *had* been too easy! Of course the 'quake hadn't been counted on and that had disrupted the plan, but at least there had been a plan, and that meant that there was someone who wanted him away from the ITA.

"You weren't on Titan five minutes before we knew."

"But what about the girl? The Lenantech arrested with me?" Something cold was suddenly eating away inside him, and the memory of the awful quakes came back to him

in a rush, and he could visualize Deanne, lying lifeless somewhere.

"Don't know. As it was, we almost missed you after the quake started. Plans went completely haywire as far as she was concerned. But no more damn fool questions. I was supposed to get you oriented before they were on top of us and you've got it all, except for—"

There was a sudden lurch and Jon was thrown sprawling, was suddenly picked up as though by some gigantic hand and thrown bodily toward a self-sealing hatch that closed just as he crashed heavily into it. The chamber was now all but airless. They'd been hit by a Tinker missile, and there was a gaping, ragged hole somewhere in this ship's hide.

He struggled to his feet. Then saw the other man, not moving, crumpled to the deck. A jagged fragment of metal was embedded in his chest. There was another sickening lurch and another. They were being clobbered with everything the Tinker-ship had.

But somehow he got to the wounded man's side. The hard eyes opened for but a moment, and the lips moved. The sounds they made were but a whisper in his ear-phones.

"Six . . . nine-X. Point . . . oh one-Y. Eight six. Z—"

And then the eyes opened wide, and the lips closed, and the man was dead.

THE ship shuddered again, and through his helmet Kane heard a dull, booming explosion, and he knew the craft had been fatally hit. Another second and it would be pulling apart at the seams. All Tinker guns were on-target and firing at will.

The locks! Where the hell would the locks be on this strangely designed ship?

He breathed again when the hatch popped open because of the dwindling air pressure. He was aware of the conglomeration of noises in his earphones. Somewhere a man was screaming. There had been men screaming for the last full minute, but only now were the sounds beginning to register on his taut brain.

"Where in hell is Zetterman?"

"Don't know—aft with the guy we were sent for I guess. Oh God."

"Then he's within twenty feet of a lock if he's still alive. But he hasn't answered us. So what d'you want to do? We're all that's left and they're almost alongside."

"They'd get us either way. If only we could get aft that lock's on the port side, away from 'em—"

Jon let the words make sense. Port side. Twenty feet away—THERE!

In seconds the inner port was open, and then he was waiting for the outer one, not even bothering to cycle the lock down. He'd be blown a little, but a running start out would help. He wanted to communicate with the men he'd heard talking, find out what the numbers meant that the dead man Zetterman had mouthed, but the Tinkers would be monitoring everything, and they'd pick up even a helmet set at this range.

The outer lock cracked slowly open, and what little pressure there still was in the lock held him gently against the widening opening as it dissipated entirely with a low howl into the black infinity of space. He popped out, and it was like stepping from an invisible mountainside into a night that was too dark, with stars that looked too close. Only crazily, you didn't fall—

He drifted on the slight momentum the spent air pressure in the lock had given him, the telltale flicker of his power pack this close to the huge gray shape that loomed less than a hundred yards to the other side of the broken ship he was leaving would mean the end of him. He thought at top speed. Of course their screens would pick him up but he gambled that he'd be discounted as simply another chunk of wreckage smashed by the Tinker guns.

Jove loomed hugely, fantastically, slightly above him. Soon his drift would become free-fall, but he must wait until the last possible moment to use the pack. Yet if he waited too long—

He clenched his teeth until they hurt, willed his arms to his sides, his hands away from the pack controls. The multi-hued bands of the great planet were alternately dark and bright, undulating slowly, as though readying to seize him, devour him, freeze him. The Gargantuan mass seemed but yards away rather than well over a million miles. Yet it was too close, and it was slowly moving in upon him.

He turned his body, tried to watch the Tinker ship. It had closed with the shattered wreck which he'd escaped, grappled to it. A port opened, and there was a pinprick of fiery light from the dark maw. Boarding in suits. But there was no orange-violet flash of a spacetender's exhausts, so perhaps, then, he had been unnoticed.

But he must still drift and he knew now that he had started to fall. Ever so slightly, but he was heading straight for the great mass of Jupiter, and his initial direction had been almost tangent to its orbit. The massive orb seemed even more flattened at its poles than usual, and its satellites were orbiting erratically, due, he knew, to the Geejay failure that had rocked the whole system.

Yet even as he watched, and as slowly as they swung, Jon Kane's practiced eye and mind detected retrograde movements, and realized that the tiny moons were slowly falling back in what he knew were approximately their former orbits. The Tinkers were somehow succeeding.

But the suit was getting cold. Its insulation was surprisingly efficient, but it was still only an emergency features of the rig, to keep a man alive for a short period in the event of heater failure. And using the heater meant radiation, yet he'd have to risk it now. And soon, the pack itself. But it would be of little avail if he wandered aimlessly, and that, he had to gamble, was where the numbers came in. With the three letter combinations, they could be spherical co-ordinates. For his life, they would have to be.

69-X. .01-Y. 86-Z. With planes of reference calculated to the median plane of planetary ecliptics relative to the Sun. Then.

Swiftly, his brain analyzed the values, gave him an approximation. And it would be a point—

And where he looked there was only blackness. It was the damn time factor, of course, that was lacking. Yet Zetterman would not have given him figures for yesterday or next month. They'd have to be figures for now, or for expected time of arrival at destination, but where? How far? Near Jove? The satellites? One of them? That would make the time factor next to zero. And—

Of course! The figures would no longer

be completely valid; margin of error would be wide after the gravitational imbalance that was only now beginning to be righted! If he scanned several hundred thousand miles to either side of his point of dead reckoning.

And there it was! Callisto. He was almost astride its orbit, and because it was nearer to his reckoned point than any of the rest, it would have to be the most probable destination.

If, of course, he was right about the time factor. If the co-ordinates referred to the location of bodies in the ship's immediate vicinity when it was attacked.

He was numb from the cold, and to wait longer with his powerpack would mean to become ensnared in Jove's awful gravity field before he could make the necessary right angle break in direction and set course for the barren planetoid.

His arms ached as he drew them up inside his suit, and his fingers were clumsy, senseless things groping for the power and heat toggles.

Then he found them. In moments there was warmth, and then the gray satellite toward which he headed began getting larger with each passing second.

THE ragged circle of the plain was unbroken for almost as far as he could see in the dim reflected light of the satellite's primary, save for recent fissures in its surface that had been caused by wrenching quakes during the failure of the Geejay, and occasional pockmarks left by the wandering bits of cosmic flotsam that had been ensnared by the surprisingly slight Callistan gravity. The plain on which he had touched down was ringed with low mountain chains that looked like giant dragon's teeth poised to impale him at any moment. And Jove itself looked weirdly tilted with its atmospheric bands now inclined steeply away from the horizontal. Its pale light cast eerie shadows across the plain; made the cracks in its surface and miniature craters deceptively large and small.

And there was no sign of human habitation, no artificial structure shone against the dark horizon, and it meant he would have to waste precious fuel, blasting in great leaps across the moon's not inconsiderable

surface, looking. He was not even certain for what.

If Zetterman had intended to have him find this particular one of eleven satellites, then why had he not included grid co-ordinates of latitude and longitude? Or had the man been about to when death intervened?"

Unless . . . whatever artificial installation existed on the planet could be located with the same co-ordinates! It would be ingenious. . . .

Rapidly, Jon envisioned a standard tri-dimensional system grid in his mind's eye; applied it to the satellite upon which he stood, substituting its ecliptic-apparent north-south axis and solar-apparent X and Y equatorial axes for the Z, X and Y axes of the standard celestial sphere. Applying Zetterman's co-ordinates, then, his direction would be generally north-northwest, to a point below the satellite's surface!

For a moment the thought sent his mind spinning back into confusion, and then he realized that by the standard spherical method of point determination, his chances would have been one in a theoretical infinity of arriving at a point exactly on the planetoid's surface.

The installation was subterranean, then, which was logical, but which made matters all the more difficult. Unless, of course, there would be some slight surface indication. God, if only Zetterman had lived an instant longer.

With a muttered prayer that his deductions and dead reckoning calculations were substantially more than empty rationalizations of desperation, Jon thumbed the power toggles of his suit pack and leapt lightly off across the planetoid's hostile surface. He would, of course, have to be right. For there was only a limited amount of oxygen left in his tanks, and his power would certainly not last forever.

He kept track of his position by the most primitive way Man knew; the orb that was the Sun. And mentally, superimposed that orb against the tri-di grid that seemed now to be stamped imperishably upon his brain, simultaneously allowing for orbital speed differential and solar parallax.

He fell back gently to the planetoid's volcanic terrain for a final time, and knew

that the spot he sought, if it existed at all, was now within scant yards of him. Mighty Jupiter was now at zenith, yet even in its directly mirrored, undulating illumination it was more difficult to see than before, and each step was an experiment. Pumice spattered over his spaceboots, solid looking stuff which could be but a shifting overlay for some bottomless fissure or yawning crevasse. And above him and down to the horizon to every side, stars gleamed tauntingly, coldly in the blackness, as though to remind him that a man could not live forever.

He began walking in ever widening circles. Something would show.

VIII

DEANNE was never certain whether her decision had been wholly a product of her own mind, seething as it had been with the awful conflict between her life's learning and what she knew to be right, or if it had been made for her by the clanging of the ship's alarm intercom unit in her quarters.

She had been lucky. She had succeeded in getting back undetected from her breach of arrest; return from her vantage point atop the conference chamber had been as uneventful as her stealthy escape through the catwalk maze to it, and once safely back in her quarters she had tried to rest, to get her mind in order and to think.

Her uncle, the Director-Gentech himself, had been beaten by B-Haaq, and B-Haaq was not a man to let an advantage be wasted. It would be only a matter of time, now. A matter of time, and the Majtech would be giving the orders, and her own fate would be in his hands. She had to decide. To stay and try to help a faltering old man or to make an outright attempt to escape even as Kane had done, and then somehow to find him! For Kane had been right! Oh, yes, Kane had been right. For power was not an end in itself, and in the last analysis, the end did not justify the means! The ITA, right or wrong . . . no! The ITA was wrong!

The alarm clanged, and then the speaker squawked raucously.

"Attention all officers and techpersonnel!

7-Planet-March

Man your combat stations! An unidentified spacecraft lies nine point three points starboard ecliptic minus twelve oh three at three hundred thousand and we are overhauling. Presence of the fugitive Kane aboard is strong probability, therefore ordcs are to fire to destroy. Repeating, all officers and techpersonnel, man your combat stations! An—"

Deanne snapped the communicator into silence with a force that nearly tore the toggle from its socket. The stupid fools! Enemies had always been destroyed in the past, and so now this enemy was to be destroyed! Regardless of the fact that they would never find Kane, alive or otherwise, if every ship aboard which he might be were blasted to bits!

In moments, the corridors and catwalks would be alive with scurrying Cadtechs, officers and labortechs, rushing pell-mell to half forgotten battle stations, trying desperately as they did to remember precisely how the Flagship's long silent cannon were operated. There would be no eyes for a shapeless, space-suited figure.

She waited tensely until the clamor outside her cubicle was at its height, then swiftly opened the narrow bulkhead hatch, stepped through it and into the milling chaos of men and women, and let herself be swept toward the suit lockers, and the bank of lock ports near them.

The corridor lights were blazing, now, and the white faces that bobbed beneath them were strained. Deanne found a suit and donned it even as the first of the craft's spacecannon was fired. The deck shuddered beneath her feet, and she was nearly knocked off balance by a trio of guntechs who had not yet found their posts. But there was more order now, and she would have to hurry. The other ship must be close, for the guns had already begun firing barrages, and that was only done when the target was in naked-eye view.

Swiftly, she slipped into an air lock, flattened herself against a narrow bulkhead as its inner port slid shut, and remained immobile as its automatic pumps cycled down to zero pressure. Now she would wait, watch and pray that no one looked into the lock in passing. It was a crazy gamble, and if Jon were not aboard. . . .

She watched the star strewn blackness, narrowed her eyelids against the awful glare in it each time a battery fired, and there was a sudden little catch in her throat as the limn of mighty Jupiter swung majestically into her field of vision. Somewhere, out there, in that awful infinity—there!

Ice seemed to form in a lump inside her. The alien ship was a perfect target, silhouetted against the huge shining disc of Jove! *And it was breaking up!*

Great gouts of fire were bursting from its engine housings, molten fragments of jagged metal glowed as they gyrated crazily from it in great showers of white-hot flame, and she could feel the awful vibration of the Flagship's guns as they continued firing mercilessly on target.

A tiny pinpoint of fire.

She saw it, and in the eye searing holocaust it did not at once register on her reeling brain.

A tiny pinpoint of blue-white fire that had not emanated from the stricken alien, but had suddenly appeared for a mere fraction of a second at a considerable distance from it! A suit pack!

With the silent prayer at her lips that it had escaped the eyes of the others, Deanne triggered open the outer lock port and launched herself into Space.

Somehow she knew the man was Jon Kane, even as she knew she had found him too late. She stood, rooted to the spot in the deep shadow of the ragged crag beneath which she had landed, unable even to warn him of the man who had suddenly appeared behind him. A man with a weapon in one hand, aimed straight at the Cadtech's back! To use her radio at such a distance would mean a power output that would bring a spacetender down upon her within minutes.

Helplessly, she watched. Watched as the other touched Jon with his weapon, forced him over the lip of a wide crater—

"No—!"

Her choked scream all but deafened her inside her helmet.

Then she saw that the other followed over the lip, and realized that their destination was somewhere inside the depression itself.

For long, silent moments she stood in maddening frustration, watching the two

men disappear into the crater, as powerless to act as she had been to warn. She could not go back, now, nor could she go further.

IX

THE crater walls had been moderately magnetized with a thin coating of metallic spray, and Kane walked before his captor down their sloping incline with greater ease than he had been able to negotiate the planetoid's natural surface. He hesitated as the crater bottom suddenly began to yawn slowly open, and there was the prodding in his back again.

"Keep moving, mister. There's a ladder, and you're first!"

Kane moved carefully, looked over the smooth lip of the now fully opened shaft. The ladder was a thin, tubular affair with narrow rungs. He dropped to his knees, swung one leg over; held with his elbows, groped with the other foot for the next lower rung. Then felt with one hand, found the top rung, and started down.

"I can't cover you on the way down," the man above him said. "But I have a fresh supply of oxygen, and I don't think you have. And I've got both guns!"

The shaft closed silently above them, and then there was sudden illumination, and Jon blinked after the half-light of the bleak world outside. The folds of his suit began to feel loose, and he knew that the shaft must also function as an air lock, and was cycling up to pressure as they descended.

When they at length reached bottom, his captor gestured at him with a hand weapon.

"Get your suit off. It stays with me. Whether you get it back again or not'll be up to you. Move!"

Jon fumbled with unfamiliarly placed dogs and buckles, then surrendered the suit, and took deep lungfull of air.

"Where now?" But the other couldn't hear. His helmet was still in place, and Jon knew that whoever wanted him wasn't taking any more chances than necessary. But as if in answer to his question, a concave panel in the shaft wall was suddenly sliding open, and the stockily built man who stepped in it covered him almost casually with a strange looking two-handed weapon. He signaled to the other, then looked at Jon as if noticing

him for the first time.

He stepped aside, motioned toward the open panel with the ugly snout of the gun he carried. "After you, mister. And step alone! You've kept the boss-man waiting a little!"

Both men had spoken in the language of Terra, yet it sounded strangely distorted to Jon. He had known the language almost all his life, but his father had taught him the words as they were said in a part of the planet that had once been called Vermont, and he noticed an odd difference in the other's speech. He wondered, idly, if any of them spoke the Universal. But at least, now, he knew who they were. Solmen of Earth, who had somehow learned to build space ships and weapons; who had somehow escaped the alert eye of Earth's Tinker spies. But he did not feel the surprise he had expected. There were legends about the men of Earth.

The heavy footfalls of the stocky, heavily muscled man behind him echoed hollowly in the narrow corridor. The passageway curved gently, sloping downward, then came to an abrupt end.

"Turn to your right."

He did, and a panel similar to the first was opening for him. He stepped through it, and his second captor followed.

"O.K., hold it."

They were in a compact room, and it was not empty. There were about ten men in it, Jon estimated at first glance, all similarly dressed in the green leatheroid coveralls that his captors wore, and barren of any insignia of rank. They looked up from their places around the paper-littered conference table, and a big man at its head half rose from his chair.

"Haine! I thought I told you—oh, is this the man?"

"Darwin be with us, sir, it is."

The big man's face changed expression quickly. He resumed his seat, and suddenly the room was quiet, and others were turning in their chairs, fixing Jon with their eyes. The big man gave no signal for him to be seated in one of the empty chairs, but spoke to him as though he had been placed under arrest.

"You are Kane? The Tinkerman arrested on Titan?"

"I am," Jon answered, trying to keep self confidence strong in his voice. "But I don't—"

"Just answer my questions, Master Kane. My name is Stine—Martin Stine. On Earth I'm a Senator. My men got you out of the lockup on Titan. Apparently you and the Tinkerwoman escaped them afterward—"

"I don't know what happened to the Lenantech, but as for myself, I'd have tried!" Jon said, ranking slightly at the smug tone of the man's voice. "Apparently you haven't heard of what happened to the ship you sent to pick me up. You won't see it again. And the only reason I'm here is that I elected to come, following the directions of one of your men that was dying."

THE Senator glanced quickly at the men surrounding him. Then, "You can tell me that part of the story later, Kane. I understand you're sort of a—renegade Tinkerman, is that right?"

"That's right, but how did you learn—"

"My organization has many men in many places. I understand that you're a rather out of the ordinary technician, Kane, and that at this minute the ITA is after your hide. So I've a proposition for you. We can use technicians." Stine was leaning back in his chair, now, relaxed, sure of himself. The others did not look so relaxed, and to Jon, seemed far from being as certain.

"First of all, I want to know who you are," Jon said, speaking Stine's Terra dialect to the best of his ability. "Earth is no different a planet than the rest."

"I said I would ask the questions, Kane! But for your information, this organization is made up of men much like yourself. I'm assuming that you achieved your technological proficiency by obtaining certain books for yourself; books the Tinkers ordered destroyed, and no longer have themselves. Well, your case is not exactly unique. The difference is, you were trapped into selection for training by the ITA. My men were not. We are, in the respect that we're free, in better position than you are to break the ITA. And certainly you did not hope to do the job single-handed."

"Break the ITA?" Jon asked. He felt a peculiar note of discord. These men were not hiding. Not just hiding.

"Why of course." The big man shifted in his seat, again glanced around at the others. Their eyes were still fastened on Jon as though they had never seen a Tinker-man before. "They may not be dictators in the true sense of the word, but they wield a tremendous political power over more than a hundred planets, Kane. You know that. They have only to refuse a planet its scheduled service visits, and the economy and civilization of that planet is suddenly faced with collapse. Ultimately, such a setup is going to mean ruin anyway. Someday, there is bound to be rebellion, and not on any single planet, but on many. It will free men from the ITA perhaps, but it will also mean quick retrogression; civilization will, because of its complexity, backslide faster than men can regain what the Wars destroyed, or re-learn what the Tinkers have kept from them.

"It might have worked if the ITA had not become sloppy. But it can no longer even do a decent Project AA! It imperils the lives of two galaxies, yet refuses to give men the knowledge to protect themselves! Therefore, we are going to destroy the Tinkers, Kane. Our propaganda machinery is gaining momentum daily, and this most recent Geejay breakdown in Sol system is grist for our mill. Our technical achievements are improving daily despite the fact that they have been carried out under the handicap of utmost secrecy over a long period of extremely difficult years.

"When I learned of your captivity by warp-beam from Titan and was told about you and the woman and was asked if I wanted you, I said yes. I spared you, Kane, and went to great trouble to obtain you, because you know the Tinkers as we could never hope to know them. And, more importantly, you can handle technology far better than either we or they. Is that true?"

Jon hesitated, looked at the faces upturned to him, saw the cold bitterness in their eyes.

"I can make a double-A good for five hundred years."

"Just as we thought. You're dangerous to them, Kane, because for some reason you know more than they do. People would start looking to you, rather than to them, for their needs, and they're scared stiff you'll

go around blabbing all you know, ruining their hold. Well, that is just the chance we want to give you. Help us, and later, you'll be able to name your own price. Go back to the Tinkers, and you're a dead man."

The room was silent again, but their eyes were still upon him. He tried to think, tried to evaluate what the big man had said. It all seemed so logical, yet—yet there was something wrong. There was something they did not understand. Or, perhaps, understood too well.

"I—I agree with you about the tremendous power they wield," Jon said slowly, "but you're wrong about destroying them. It's true they're not the technicians they once were. They have polluted logic with belief and historical fact with legend; they do know *how*, but they don't know *why*, and that's affecting their know-how, if you see what I mean. They use belief more and more and reason less and less—"

Stine nodded. "Precisely. If knowledge is not given room to grow, it deteriorates, and finally is nothing more than half understood pseudo truths. Therefore I fail to see—"

"If you destroy them," Jon interrupted, "you suddenly remove the last recognized seat of technical knowledge that exists in our two galaxies. Recognized, you understand. And that'd mean real chaos, Senator. The people would be so scared and helpless at the prospect of being helpless that they'd revert to savages even faster than the way in which you described. They'd panic for certain—panic as panic hasn't been known since the Wars themselves." Jon let the sentence trail off, half wondering as he spoke why he was suddenly championing a system which he hated, defending a reactionary philosophy of existence which stunted men's minds at every turn. For Stine was at least half right—the Tinkers did threaten the very essence of intellectual freedom. Yet at the same time he knew that to destroy them would be to cause even worse harm.

It was as though the others around the table and the man who was his captor did not exist, now. It had become a quiet, tense drama between two minds; and Jon knew he had not been brought here to do Stine's thinking for him.

"You know, Kane," Stine was saying

then, his voice suddenly smooth and soft, his big face relaxing into a studied grin, "they got their hooks into you more deeply than I'd thought. You're still half-Tinker, aren't you?"

"But I'm not speaking from loyalty! Only from logic—" The big man waved a meaty hand deprecatingly, interrupted easily.

"Master Kane, the Space-Tinkers must be forced to give up their books and charts. They must be forced to relinquish this semi-intellectual, semi-religious hold they have on over a hundred planets; their monopoly, in short, must be broken!" A huge fist slammed emphatically down on the littered table top. "My organization has worked long and hard and preserved its secrets at great risk toward that end! We have the ships, we have the weapons—some better, we believe, than those of the ITA—and we have the men! And you, sir, are either with us or against us!" His face had become florid, and Jon knew now that Stine was playing for effect on the others; knew suddenly that his own logic was right, and that it was again recognized as a threat, even as B-Haaq had recognized it. A threat to personal power!

And suddenly words were coming in heated torrents from his own lips. "Secrecy! It is all you and the ITA can think of! Whatever it is you know or learn, it must be kept from others! Yes, even while you speak of breaking the ITA monopoly of knowledge and power, you seek to form an identical one yourself! Can't you understand that where there is secrecy, peace and progress cannot exist? Can't you understand that in the realm of science and technology, there are no secrets? The facts of nature are everywhere in Creation, Senator! You cannot hide them! For awhile you may blind people to them, but they cannot be hidden, they are for everyone to see and use as he will, regardless of which side he is on! The Tinkers have kept people blind to them for a few years, but it has become increasingly difficult; and they are learning the hard way that the worst of keeping secrets is the forgetting of them yourself!"

Stine's face was becoming white and tense, and the others gave uneasy glances in his direction, but he did not interrupt, and Jon kept going, unleashing the whole tor-

rent of thoughts that had tormented his soul for so long, so very long.

"You speak of monopoly, Senator, but you're forming one yourself! You, and your organization, have been fortunate enough, as I was, to have found some of the old books, to have learned some of the old knowledge with which the armament for the Wars was built, and against which, when their horror was finally over, people everywhere rebelled. It was they who burned the books, Senator! Not the ITA! It was they who wanted done with all that seemed to them responsible for the carnage which they had somehow survived! It was they—on a hundred planets—who without thinking, ran down their scientists, their technicians; murdered them for possessing the knowledge which they had misused! And the few technicians who escaped were bitter and frightened men. They managed to salvage a few of the old ships and escape. And theirs was the natural error of assuming that if they were not to suffer what their murdered companions had, they must think in terms of using what they alone knew as a weapon against those who did not and would not be allowed to have that knowledge!"

"But—and listen to me, gentlemen!—even as the Senator has said, if knowledge is not given room to grow, it deteriorates! And by keeping their well guarded secrets to themselves, entrusting them only to specially selected personnel whom they recruited year after year for training from the planets so that their organization could grow more rapidly in numbers, and by keeping those 'secrets' sacrosanct and unchallengeable, they became at length outmoded, and finally half forgotten and adulterated with pompous nonsense! And if you are to do the same, then the same will happen to you!" He paused quickly for fresh breath, then plunged on headlong. "The solution is not in fighting and battle—for that is what precipitated the whole stupid situation in the first place, as it always will. I told you I could do a double-A that would last five hundred years, and I can! And I will do it! And I will show you how to do it! But only on the condition that your propaganda machine gives the Tinkers the entire credit for it!"

"Master Kane, that is enough!"

"I'm not finished yet! Can't you see the effect such a move will have? The Tinkers will be grateful, first of all, because they're in desperate straits right now. Secondly, they will realize that there is superior knowledge to their own, and that it can be a beneficial thing, rather than a threat to their well being. From that point they might be convinced that their 'secrets' should no longer be kept, but instead given back to the very people who once destroyed them in anger. And thirdly, the people will have new faith in the ITA and its ability; new respect for the technical knowledge which they now fear and covet so dangerously! In such a way, gentlemen, you can get civilization climbing again in such a way that the Tinkers will be eliminated, but of their own volition, because they will at length have no more to fear, and no further defensive purpose to serve.

"Unless—" and Jon paused for a long breath, "Unless, Senator, you simply want the power the Tinkers now enjoy, for yourself!"

Stine looked at him for a long moment.

And then he smiled, but there was Winter in his eyes.

"We all make mistakes," he said softly. "Sorry, Haine! Take him away!"

X

STEALTHILY Deanne picked her way from shadow to shadow toward the smooth walled depression, her feet scarcely touching the planetoid's riven surface in the slight gravity. Yards from it, she got to her stomach and crawled to the lip, peered over.

Every muscle in her body went tense as she saw the hidden hatch at the crater's bottom sliding soundlessly closed.

As she had thought, the crater wall was artificially magnetized, and in a half crouch, clinging to the deepest shadow cast by the grotesque ball of Jupiter above her, she edged her way downward. She reached the spot where the camouflaged hatch had closed, and, again prone, waited.

There was only the space of seconds before the round slab of metal began opening! She tensed, and with her helmet touching

the ground, heard the sound of heavy footsteps climbing upward, making the hollow, clanging sounds of space boots on metallic ladder rungs.

A space helmet suddenly thrust itself above the opening, and for a frozen second, she could see the man's face. It was not Jon's! There was a look of stunned surprise upon it for that timeless moment, and Deanne knew even as she moved that it was this space between seconds or never at all.

With all the strength in her body she swung her right leg, swung the heavy toe of her spaceboot straight at the man's face plate!

He tried vainly to dodge, to drop downward to safety. Had Deanne waited a heartbeat longer she would have missed. She felt the terrible impact as her boot hit squarely, shattered the thin plastiglass of the helmet, went through it to strike flesh and bone.

Instinctively her eyes went shut tight as the man inside the ruptured suit virtually exploded.

But there was no time to think of what she'd done, to wonder if this was murder or the duty of warfare: the man was dead. Half in, half out of the yawning hatchway, sprawled like a bloody puppet, his weapons still in their holsters at his sides. She took them. And even in the light gravity of Callisto, it took nearly all the strength she could summon and all her courage to haul the limp thing that had been a man all the way out of the gaping shaft and then push it, over and over, away from her, away from the hatch that had already begun to automatically swing downward.

She squirmed quickly beneath it, found the ladder rungs with her boots, and then clung to the slender ladder in the sudden darkness without moving, her muscles trembling at the edge of panic. To misjudge now was to fall hideously through blackness to certain destruction only God knew how abysmally far below.

Then somehow she steel'd herself. Made her legs move mechanically; found the next rung below. And then the next and the next.

The red blindness of exhaustion under the blaze of desert suns flooded over his

numbed brain in a dark backwash of pain, and with it were all the past tortures of Prokyma stockades and the hopeless defeat that had lain at the fringe of every movement of his life; Jon Kane could not see and could hear only weirdly distorted sounds for he was, if not yet dead, then close to death, and only through some freak of neural reaction, not quite beyond the threshold of consciousness. But he had not spoken. And now that power was quite lost to him.

But he could still somehow feel the animal presence of his torturers, ringed tight around him yet in the tiny, glaring cubicle of polished steel; there was new pain in his shattered face, and he knew it was the freezing carbon dioxide spray designed to shock him back to full consciousness. But now it was only a new pain.

There was the voice of Haine.

"Hurry up, get him around. If he cashes in before we get anything out of him Stine'll blow a connection. That's a man who hates to lose on an investment."

"Didn't invest much. Didn't risk much either, if you ask me. What else was that broken down tank good for anyway? I say kill the—"

"Get him around and shut up."

The freezing pain again. But the darkness held.

New sounds. Stine.

"What have you been trying to do, kill him outright? How much have you gotten?"

"Nothing yet, sir. He's either the craziest man in the universe or the toughest. Or else he doesn't know anything."

"Nonsense! The things this man knows can put us all in the shade, and don't you forget it! But if we don't find out just how much his people still know—or don't know—it'll be your necks as well as mine! They realize there's somebody else besides themselves in Space, now."

The darkness seemed to be lifting a little; the numbness seemed to be thawing from his brain, and the pain became more agonizingly acute.

"We'll try again, sir—"

"Never mind. There's a better use for this fellow than killing him by inches. Perhaps he places little value on his own life, but when it comes to those of a few billion

people. Yes, Haine, do you think you could wreck a Geejay?"

"Wreck a—" There was the sound of hoarse breathing from a half dozen men, and Jon felt something stir inside him, but it was as though he were a thing disconnected from his physical body; that he no longer had power of decision over it. "—sure, I guess so. A double-A in reverse! Haw! Where?"

"Canis Major, Proky system, if that's where he's from."

"Don't look like a Prokyma to me."

"Never mind that. Could you do the job so that the ITA couldn't repair it? And I mean NOT AT ALL?"

"Hell, sir, one of our E-blasters would do that much—"

"I have a feeling that one very simple way to gain our end, Haine, would be through the use of our E-blasters against every ship the ITA possesses—and just what do you suppose that would leave us? This fellow here wasn't so far wrong, you know, when he pointed out what would happen in the event the ITA were suddenly destroyed. We'd be left with a universe full of the screaming meemies. We'd be on top, but on top of the biggest booby hatch you ever saw! If we're going to do ourselves any good, we leave the ITA in one piece. The only difference being, we tell them what to do!"

"Now ain't that nice of us, to just walk in like that without firing a charge—"

"I'm doing the thinking around here, Johnson!"

"It's a cinch you ain't doing much of the shooting! Letting fancy-brains, here, tell you—"

Jon heard the sudden sound of bone crunching against bone; there was a choked yelp of pain, and the sound of a man falling heavily. Then Stine was talking again, softly.

"Anyone else here who prefers muscle to brain power?"

"Sir—Johnson's—you—"

"Bury him later, and listen to me now! I want the Gravity Justifier in Procyon smashed so that the Tinkers can't do a thing with it—but so that *he can!* Do you understand, Haine?"

"I can smash it up so that *we* couldn't put it back together in a million years."

"You'll be responsible. Let's get this man aboard the *New World* and be ready to up-ship within an hour. We're going to have our cake, gentlemen, and eat it, too! Unless, of course, our friend Kane, here, will be able to watch ten billion people die as an entire planetary system breaks up, and do nothing about it! All right, let's get going!"

And then there was the sound of another man coming into the already crowded cubicle.

"Senator Stine, sir! Look what we found coming down the ladder! And in a shooting mood, too! I'll need a new space rig—"

"JON!"

"Well! The ITA hasn't lost much time! She looks a little bit white, doesn't she, Thurston? And seems to know our friend, here! Gentlemen, I think things are going to work out rather well . . ."

And that was the moment that Jon Kane returned to full consciousness, and full pain.

But he kept his eyes shut, his voice silent.

THE banks of viewscreens in the *New World's* NIC room reflected a kaleidoscope of horror as no man had seen horror before, and as only a man of Kane's century could understand it. To the uninitiated observer of an earlier time whose entire life experience had been within the narrow confines of a single planet, the softly glowing spheres in the screens would have seemed remote things; untouchable, and of only speculative interest. The interest may have been heightened slightly by the sudden rifts that appeared in the surfaces of some, or by the peculiarly undulating ocean masses that seemed bent on erasing the land masses of others.

But to Jon, securely shackled to an ack-seat as was Deanne beside him, the screens showed an impending wave of death and destruction on a scale that bordered on the unthinkable.

Procyon I and II were already torn near the point of total break-up; III, IV and V, because of their greater masses, were trembling with a slower rhythm, but the close-up screens showed their largest cities had already begun to crumble. Their streets were clogged with both dead and living, and the

gaping mouths of panic stricken faces were eerily silent.

The six outer planets had not yet felt their first tremors, but they had begun to enter subtly-altered orbital paths, and whole continents were unnaturally bathed in the hellish light of twin suns that spewed great, flaming masses of their life-stuff with unchecked abandon into the infinite well of the void.

The largest screen showed a wide, wafer-thin disc floating with an inhuman serenity in the blackness, its flat plane tipped gently to the ecliptic, its surface crawling with tiny ant-like creatures that were men. Hovering above it was a glistening, pencil-shaped object from which more men came, their tiny forms followed by irregularly shaped masses, weightless on the invisible tow-lines.

"Not doing much good, are they, Kane?"

The big man hulked above him, beefy face florid but split with a relaxed, confident grin. Jon broke his long silence.

"Starn has told you he would surrender! Why can't you accept it, and then I promise you I'll—"

"You'll do what? You'd pull everything in the book and you know it, Kane, and we'd end up having to kill you or be killed ourselves. And if you were to die." Jon turned his glance toward Deanne, saw her shudder, then turn her eyes away from the screens, bitter defeat mingled tightly with the tears in them. "And anyway," Stine was saying, "Starn's not the boss anymore! And what good d'you think it's going to do me to push over a has-been? B-Haaq is the one who's calling their plays now, Kane. And B-Haaq is the boy who wants to fight! Too bad you didn't kill him when you had the chance! Look at him out there! Trying to tell me he can fix it, or anything I can do to it! Telling me if I move this ship in a mile closer he'll blow me out of Space! Oh, brother—"

"He could, Stine," Jon said. And the big man whirled.

"With those antiquated pop guns he carries? Don't try to make me angry, Kane. He's going to sweat it out there until he and his whole damn crew drops. And then I'm sending you in! By that time things'll be so bad I'll *know* I can trust you. You're the type, Kane! Fight like hell up to the

last second, and then comes the noble, heroic sacrifice part. Oh, you'll do the job, all right after you've sat here watching long enough!"

Jon bit his lip, watched the big man stalk back and forth before the wide banks of screens.

"I could beat him in less time than it takes to tell it with E-blasters!" Stine was saying. "But they say there's a better way of winning arguments than with guns, don't they, Master Kane? Slaves are always more valuable than corpses, for one thing, and for another, I think people ought to know that Martin Stine has more to his string than guns alone! Yes . . ." His broad back was to both Jon and Deanne, now, and he was staring out through a wide port into the gem-studded blackness, and his words were for his own ears. "They will know who is a technician and who is not! The ITA is weak with age—and the weak become the slaves, and the strong become the masters! They shall see."

"Stine, you're a fool!"

The big man turned, faced Jon, and his big face blanched in sudden anger, and then the color flooded back to it and he laughed.

"Stine, do you know what B-Haaq will do when he realizes that he has failed? When he realizes that the woman who spurned him and the man who deserted his ranks are aboard this ship? Do you know what he'll do rather than knuckle under to you? He's the same kind of man you are, Stine. He'll come gunning with everything he's got! You'll be a seive before you know what hit you . . . and for once I'll be glad to see B-Haaq take a trick!"

He heard Deanne gasp, could almost feel the trembling of her body.

"That's enough out of you, Kane, or there'll be a couple dozen more bandages on that honest face of yours! If that puppy even turns his nose toward me, I'll show him what real guns are! And let him sweat out there without his engines for awhile!"

"You only think you will! You haven't the faintest idea of what alloy the Tinkers build their ships, and you know it! And it's going to be fun watching you find out."

"If they use the tin they use to fix everything else."

"They may be stupid, Stine, but they've been around quite awhile."

"All right, so you know what alloy their hulls are built of! So my batteries of electro-cannon will—"

"Bounce off like a flashlantern beam, Stine. But I guess you'll want to wait and see for yourself. And if I know B-Haaq, you'll get the chance!"

And suddenly Stine was towering over him again. Jon winced at the vicious slap that landed squarely on his misshapen face.

"You'll tell me the alloy! Do you hear me?" A slap harder than the first. "Do you understand, Kane?"

Jon felt blood trickle down his chin.

"I'll not tell you a thing, Stine. Not about the alloy, or even how to rig your guns to beat it."

The next blow was with Stine's closed fist. Jon's head snapped back viciously, and he held on by sheer will to consciousness. He tensed for another blow. It did not come. And suddenly, Stine's voice was a calm, almost silky thing, barely loud enough for Jon to hear.

"A pity," he was saying, "that your man is so defiant a fellow, Lenantech. I almost imagine that even after the risk you took to save his hide, he'd watch your pretty face be beaten to a pulp rather than tell me the things I'd like to know! That's the way with these noble fellows, you know. Of course, a girl's face isn't everything. But, I suppose that he'd even—"

"Stine, you wouldn't dare!"

"Care to try me, Master Kane?"

"Damn you, Stine—"

The big man clenched his right fist, raised it, and Jon watched Deanne's face whiten, saw the silent plea in her eyes in the quick glance she gave him. But her taut lips did not move.

"You had better speak, Kane—"

"All right! All right, I'll rig your guns for you!"

"And you'd better hurry! Unless my screens are out of order, your precious ten billion Prokymen haven't too much time left."

Jon looked at the screens again, and he knew his horror was reflected in his swollen face. Something writhed sickeningly inside him and he looked at the screen in which

the Geejay swung. B-Haaq and his men were at last leaving it! Leaving it, giving up.

But he said nothing as Stine summoned Haine from in-ship, and kept his silence as the squat, burly man unshackled him while Stine held a hand weapon at Deanne's head.

"I'll need her to help," he bit out then. "On your guns, as well as on the Justifier. She's worked on double-A's before."

"She stays, Kane!"

"Very well, she stays. But if this outfit can't get the Geejay fixed either, people won't be too impressed, will they. I say I need her, Stine. That thing out there is too badly wrecked even for me, now, alone. But it's up to you. I'll rig your guns."

"All right, Kane! All right. The woman goes with you. But she stays right here until you've done a job on my batteries!"

"You win, I'm not arguing. Let's get it over with."

Haine led him out of the NIC room, and he could feel Deanne's accusing eyes at his back. She hated him now. He knew it.

XI

THE thin disc shown weirdly in the light of the tortured binary, and Jon guided Deanne's suit-bloated figure up over its lip, then clambered to its sleek metal surface himself. It was a tricky business, without weight, and without sufficient handling knowledge of the alien-built power pack to attempt the delicate maneuvering required with it.

Together, wordlessly, they reeled in the cylindrical capsule which contained their tools.

A scant ten thousand miles off, B-Haaq waited in the Flagship. Waiting, Jon knew, for an element of Tinker ships to arrive and form about him in battle formation. And when they came. Yes, he knew what B-Haaq would do.

He looked back, and could barely discern the dark mass of Stine's great craft as it blotted out the myriad of stars behind it. Power against power. They would have to hurry.

He moved toward Deanne, and she moved away. He grabbed her wrist, pulled

her to him, touched her helmet with his, and spoke rapidly.

"Keep your radio off, and we'll talk this way! Now do just as I say, and before you put me down for a sellout, work like you've never worked before! We may have thirty minutes—an hour maybe, before this whole system goes to pieces! And less than that before the other fireworks start!"

Then he was busy getting at the tools, getting at the heart of the Justifier.

Stine's men had messed it up pretty badly. B-Haaq's men had not made matters any better. The operation itself was a simple one, but there was so much to be undone.

Wordlessly, Deanne worked with him in the awful silence. He thought as he worked how ridiculous it must seem to whoever watched—two pygmies on the face of a mechanism hardly a hundred yards across, pitting their wits against a Nature gone mad—two pygmies, attempting to come to grips with an entire solar system! Working alone, in the cold and the dark, with only their helmlanterns to guide their eyes and hands.

Deanne worked smoothly where she recognized the few standard procedures that Jon employed, fumbled a little as he took shortcuts that she had never imagined possible. Yet somehow, he noticed, she managed almost to keep up with him, seemed to be following his thinking almost by instinct.

And that was about all it was that differentiated him from the standard ITA technician. Instinct; imagination coupled with it, and the knowledge that could only be learned by an ever-inquiring mind. Jon Kane. Scientist.

Finally, he touched her helmet again.

"That does it, girl. She's going. Within twenty hours the storm'll be over; within less than one, things will start taming down on the planets. And then we'll get your uncle to take us back to Sol system, and do a real job on the one there."

He saw her eyes widen. "My—uncle?"

"Yeah. Now keep quiet a minute. I—"

"Turn around, both of you! I want to see your faces just once more!"

Jon whirled. He saw Deanne shriek inside her helmet. At the lip of the great disc, B-Haaq stood, a hand-weapon in each gauntlet!

"I knew who they'd send, Master Kane! Did you think I would leave this little project all to you, and give away all the credit to boot? Stand still!"

"It's Director Gentech Starn who gets the credit for this one, B-Haaq! And I'm pretty sure, after seeing you in action, that he'll know, this time how to use it! Because he knows now that you can't do today's business with yesterday's tools and be in business tomorrow!"

"Damn pretty, lover boy! Is that the way you take other men's women, too?"

Damn him, Jon thought. Time's running out now. Running out.

"Suit yourself on that! I think I trimmed you good!" And with that Jon kicked viciously against the ponderous mass of the tool cylinder, launched himself straight at B-Haaq!

Two guns flared!

The twin beams flashed straight into Jon's flying figure, then bounced harmlessly into Space!

And then the two of them were drifting in the void, fighting silently and desperately for a death hold.

The universe wheeled crazily as Jon fended off the other's gauntlets as they grabbed for his tank hoses, and then he struck with all the strength he could at the fragile face plate. And was parried.

Then for a moment their helmets touched.

"You're a real jerk, Majtech! Why do you think I didn't take any of those guns with me from the Flagship's arsenal? Hell, there wasn't one in there that worked!"

B-Haaq made a desperate grab for the side-dog on Jon's helmet; caught it, began to twist!

Jon clamped the suited arm, held it . . . held it, twisted his body. Then fingered the suit pack into blazing life, melting a horrible, gaping hole in the Majtech's suit!

For the merest fraction of a second he saw the terror stricken grimace of hatred and disbelief on B-Haaq's thin face, and then the interior of the helmet was a mass of exploding flesh and blood.

He whirled, Blasted recklessly back to

the Justifier, almost missed; back-blasted, slid.

He grabbed Deanne about the waist of her suit, and then flicked on his space radio.

"This is Kane calling Stine! Kane, calling Stine! Do you hear me, Stine?"

His earphones crackled. "What the blue Jupiter is going on out there, Kane? Have you—"

"Stine, you're a real dumbhead! A real Prokyman bat brain! You should have learned better who to trust by this time! The girl and I have done a job for you out here. You'll never get it fixed now, not in ten million years! Sure, a system dies; it gives its life, but so that people like you can't make other people think you're God and enslave others like it! You're through, Stine!"

"Kane, you're going to die where you stand!" The earphones almost shook from their connections.

And Jon pulled at Deanne, pulled her prone beside him on the smooth metal of the nearly-flat disc!

"Shield your eyes!"

Every gun in Stine's batteries blazed. Blazed, and smashed inward in a blinding, corruscating sea of blue-white flame that for a moment seemed to rival Procyon herself! For silent seconds, the great ship seemed to devour itself in the pent up energies suddenly unleashed in a single hell-spawned torrent of fire from its erupting bowels, then it was no longer matter, but a great wraith of superhot gasses fast dissipating into the dark of Infinity.

"Jon! Jon, darling—"

"It's O.K., princess. It's O.K. now."

"But you—"

"I fixed his guns for him. He made me do it, remember? Oh, I fixed 'em good!"

And then they both laughed. Laughed until the tears came, two pygmies in Space, two pygmies against a solar system of planets with a whole universe to hear them.

Then slowly, two fine trails of fire started toward a slender, streamlined shape that hovered ten thousand miles off.

Somewhere high above them, a Cepheid winked. Knowingly.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

takes an interest in it is going to want you to increase it if possible. Well, aren't they?

Thassall. Everything covered but the cover femme. Styly,

Carol McKinney

PARSECIAN YARDSTICK

63 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Jack:

The various subjects you mentioned in the November Vizigraph, in hopes of renewing another long dead controversy from its grave, seem to have already been well covered and agreed upon. Mechanical covers versus sex are only two branches of the same field. As long as a cover remains commendable art work, the whole question is theoretical.

To bring up a timely example, however, Mr. Kelly Freas has experimented in both—the former in the September issue, the latter in the November. This indulgence of his, to discover the type of work he is best suited for, can only leave the well-versed critic with one conclusion. The November offering stunk.

Jack, I heard you want an opinion more explicit than the above, so I will attempt to explain the obvious. One of the best—perhaps in a few years—covers to hit the stands on PLANET was the Freas cover of September. It was more inclined to the mechanical, if you wish to call it that. And it was fashioned superbly.

At the other end of the line was the gaudy, splashy, sex gratia segis sort of thing which was done by the same artist for the magazine two months later. It wasn't any better than what staff artists on comic books could turn out in mass production. Since PLANET never has been noted for exceptional covers, please don't risk ruining a good thing by forcing Freas to do something he balks at. He seems more in the EMSH class than in the Schomburg. And if you think PLANET won't sell without sex, better recall Anderson. But PLANET won't have much to offer in the way of art . . . sex, perhaps, but not art.

So Sol Galaxan really was a pen-name, eh? I suspected something of the sort, but didn't have the space to say so in my last letter. A little too obvious.

Can it be that the past two issues of PLANET show that it is coming back into its own? The grand grounds for an argument would seem to be at present, "Shall PLANET be satisfied with the old days? Or will it strive to better itself further than that?"

You have done a great job of getting PLANET back on its feet, but you must remember, Jack, that the old days have gone by us. While her name still has attracting power, Leigh Brackett doesn't write as well as she used to. She hasn't been able to change her style, to adapt to the needs of present day science fiction.

Ray Bradbury is another matter. It would be well to have a discussion on him. It is granted that his writing is not always pure stf. But what there is of it is WRITING. Not hack and splash stuff. You can't go skimming over his stories like a two-bit western, for they are good literature.

The people who say Ray swings to fantasy too much are those who can't extract an allegory from an otherwise ordinary story. The one trouble of the Bradbury of the present day is that he tends to let

his writing do all the work . . . that is, he de-emphasizes the story's plot. Without a plot, a short story is just an incident. While it may be good literature, it won't be remembered as long.

The true yardstick that will measure PLANET's growth will be the ability to get other name-writers. A story by some of the accepted greats, like Leinster or Sheckley. If PLANET wants to win back her name, the only way to do it will be first, by printing good material generally as she has been doing in the past three issues, and second, attract a few of the name-writers, if only for every third issue. Not just Brackett and Bradbury as peace-offerings, but some of the other big authors who will write not just good stories, but good literature. It may be difficult, but PLANET cannot remain at a standstill forever.

Joe Keogh

HALL OF FAME

PFC Claude R. Hall
US54100511
Btry A, 6th Tng Bn
AAA RTC
Fort Bliss, Texas

Dear Ed,

Well, I've got a room to myself now—so I'm going to write another illo-winning letter. This time, I want a Bergley type cover—one with s-x running around in it. Wouldn't even mind her being chased by a BEM. The girl will be for me and the BEM for the Sarg when he makes his usual inspection every morning.

That other illo I won eight months ago was okay, but rocketships couldn't help these bare walls any. Besides, the Sergeant might come in, see the walking-female-birthday-suit, and grant me a three day pass!

I would fool him tho. I'd take the illo with me!

That was a pretty cute letter I had in the November issue, wasn't it? But that was a heck of a trick, taking out all of the choice words. All I was trying to do was to perk up the old VIZIGRAPH! Maybe I should have written a poem.

Old fans are losing their heads,
And dashing out letters in panic!
The reason? The old war grounds are dying.
Something's wrong with Viz in Planet

But Hall, to the rescue
In MUZ style will come
To rid Viz of the letters
So crude and so bum
When someone grew bold and asked the great fan
"HOW?"

He replied, "Hell, with pen names, I write VIZ now!"

Told you I was good!

More? You want more?

When is PLANET really going to come up with another good novel? The four novelets in the November ish were just so-so. For a while—when reading Holden's, BEYOND THE X ECLIPTIC, I thought he was going to come up with some new ideas and really weave a good story. But it was a dud.

Bradbury's story was another work of art—but I was hoping it would be a story. Maybe his work-of-art coming up in the next ish will be a story.

Ray's good, there's no way to say different, but sometimes, I wish he'd just relax and write instead of compose.

SLAY-RIDE—Hah! This was a story? THIS WAS A STORY? How many kin-folks do you have, O'Sullivan? Berry, Mullen, and Marks.

PASSWORD, was a fair piece and worth wasting time commenting about.

THE VIZIGRAPH WAS STILL THE BEST THING ABOUT THE ISSUE. A little weak, except for that letter of mine, of course. But this letter will throw some life into it.

Now for a few chosen insults in a MUZZY manner.

How come Beck receives an illo? He doesn't know his head from a hole in the ground!

Incidentally, I'm not warring with PLANET—just the dope heads in it. For my money, PLANET's still the best in the sf-dom field. Don't change Viz! Because if you did, I couldn't tell Joe Keogh off. He wasn't arguing about the layout of the cover. Probably never noticed more than the female on the front.

A. K. King is a fan? Writes more like a Slan. Wish I cared as much about Mars as this guy does. Frankly, after ten days there, I grew tired of that reddish, purple sand. And of Venus, I couldn't stand the type of women. Too many heads!

More beer! This Beerman is right. Why don't you develop more new writers? For instance, *bump!* (This little crack reminds me of when Joe Gibson used to plague editors with letters, always sneaking in some thing about his stories which never sold. Now Joe's a dirty old pro.)

Carol McKinney. Do you shine Berry's shoes for him. Mayhaps you be Bryan Berry? No! (Are you sure?) You're blowing up enough eggboos to make him think he's good. How much is he paying you? Or do you just earn a commission? Maybe he doesn't pay you anything. Maybe he doesn't leave crumbs in your mail box to feed you with.

Oh, but I'm feeling mean tonight!

Val Walker? I heard through the fanvine that this character just got married. Sounds more like a 10 year old in his letter. Three cheers, three yips, two dam-goods, two goods, two swells, and only one terrific. It's easy to realize that Walker had to use a dictionary to locate these "Goshohboyohgee" terms. In a two hundred and fifty word letter, the guy must have eye strain from peering at Webster's. And now he's going to hang Patrick and you, O'Sullivan, to the mast head! Horrors! Oh happy horror! Two good old IRISH names like that going to the rope. What will Willis say? Will he let this crime be done? Or will he come to the rescue?

Frankly, I'm worried to death and I'm also,

your servant,

Claude Raye Hall
"a real live genuine PFC"

LETTER OF THE LAW

4162 21st St.
Racine, Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

My first letter to you, and I will come to the point at once. I used to read the letter section, until it depressed me too much to read it.

I want some answers. Is that stupid, inane jargon supposed to be Science-Fiction slang? Frankly, it nauseates me. Do they deliberately misspell words or are they just plain dumb in spelling? Also, I do not believe in abbreviations for words that were not meant to be abbreviated.

I have been reading Science-Fiction for over five years. I consider myself a F-a-n not a fen. I'll punch anyone in the nose that calls me a fen. Who made

up that silly name? What does it mean? Sounds too much like "fink" to me.

Another thing that brings my blood pressure up are those self-styled experts who read one magazine a month, then pick the stories and authors apart. If they are so good, why don't they write? I read every magazine and book I can find. I do without other things in order to buy them.

The best story I ever read was written by Eric Frank Russell. Are you going to print more of his stories?

I am enclosing a photograph of myself in case anyone thinks I look like a fink.

Thank you for reading this.

Sincerely,

Hazel Irene Stamper

Ed's Note: Please, Hazel, please. Let's not start swinging right in the middle of the VIZIGRAPH; might knock the type to h— and gone. Did I hear someone say "Good." Your snapshot was so minute, Hazel, that I couldn't possibly make a decent reproduction from it. Thus our readers shall have to make their guesses as to whether or not you are a fink . . . and speaking of words: just what IS a "fink"?

STRAW HAT AND PULP MAN

P.O. Box 964—GPO
New York 1, N. Y.

Dear Jack,

Finding this lowly one's name mentioned in the Nov. P.S., in first place, towards the selection of one of your honorable illos by one of your noble and honorable artists, compels me to sit down in jubilant gratitude to pen yet another missive for your august journal of extra-terrestrial sagas. In a separately enclosed note I've mentioned the stellar portrait I've chosen.

To answer at least one of your questions beneath Sid Sullivan's letter (I won't be held responsible after having answered more than one of those epochal queries)—no, no, NO, a thousand times NO! Never use that dirty word again, "PLANET going pocketsize!" Indeed—humphh. "Pocketsize" is now so commonplace; and besides, it gives publishers strange ideas, such as charging 35 cents for something that sold for a quarter, and I don't like paying more than a quarter.

From having seriously worked over the BTC machine in my secret laboratory, high up in the most remote part of the Sierras, I've calculated that: no 35 cents mag is worth more than 25 cents—none of the present 25 cents mags are worth more than 15 cents to 20 cents. Sfantasy fiction is supposed to be "selling better" than ever; if so, why do prices go up, and reading quantity gets consistently cut down?

I think the answer is that various publishers and editors are striving so frantically to appear "different and original," that invariably they end up all looking the same. Oh, for the days when a SF mag looked like a SF mag, and not a carbon copy of CORONET or THE READER'S DIGEST. Besides, I just hate paying 35 cents—that's all!

Lengthening the VIZI? Should be obvious by now . . . stretching it out a couple pages more, I mean. Don't you see, MAN! You'll have more readers as a result, and not paying anyone a synthetic copper penny for doing it, cutting down overhead on extra word-rates, too, that otherwise would clutter up so many valuable pages with questionable fiction! A pox on reading SF! Let's have a publication with

nothing but letter columns and reviews of fan-interest instead!

Seriously, however, it's now statistically provable that circulation has a tendency to climb with the usage of certain types of features, whereas moreso than not, it declines when such departments aren't prevalent. Now, if you could listen to reason, I could make us both rich. All you have to do is. . . . But, aha! I'm not foolish. I'll trade-mark, copyright, patent, or do something like dat dere before my *ideas* are ever stolen again.

My apologies to Mr. Bryan Berry for having doubted his rightful place as a human being on the face of (or beneath) the Earth. With the situation what it now is in the current pulp and pocket-book crop in Gt. Brit., however, one can most of the time suspect J. R. Fearn having a hand in something or other. But I know it couldn't be Mr. Fearn after seeing Mr. Berry's picture, and studying it carefully over again. You see, Mr. Fearn always wears a beany with a miniature guided missile on top.

To answer Ron Ellik's awesome query, BEM means Bug-Eyed-Monster. Though sporadically used by 2nd Fandom's minions around the late Thirties (c. 1938-39), it suddenly appeared in more than tolerant use with the early Forties. A more thorough study of "Bem" can be made by consulting letter columns of PLANET, STARTLING, and THRILLING WONDER of about those years.

Correction, Claude Hall! None of Bradbury's stories for the slicks were reprinted from early PLANET or any other SF mag. However, if you inferred that most of his book efforts represent the majority of his earlier work for the pulps, then you are right; but all his works for the Class-A mags have been original to date.

Those saying the VIZ lacks spirit are correct. As I said, the whole dept's too short, and that goes for most of the letters to boot. As one reader stated, it's not a bad idea if you gave some notes on "coming attractions"; however, as this may be taking up more space than is necessary, which could be put to better use, it wouldn't be a bad afterthought if you'd have about half a page of your own editorializations where all the propaganda can be taken care of, allowing you to make your own sage (?) comments, and tee off anywhere you want. Too, you can save more space by using smaller interiors of not more than half to a full page long.

Of course, PS is doing pretty well for the moment. This isn't as praiseworthy as you might think, for the whole SF field's been wearing thin at the heels lately. But of about three pulp-size mag companies in business, you and Standard lead the pack, not failing either in giving a rough time to the pocket-size variety, of which the majority are pretty sickening, to say the least, failing to measure up to yours and Standard's quality (excluding your antithetical 2 SCIENCE-ADVENTURE BOOKS). Seems a bit funny, come to think of it, that so many mags have abandoned the pulp-size field, for the pint-size format, that it's now leaving so few pulp-size mags in existence to the extent that the pocketsize will end up looking commonplace, with the pulp-size soon becoming distinguished. I'm inclined to think that, eventually, a simple and modest format, like the pulp-size mags of early years, will win out in the end. Naturally a little quality and decorum doesn't hurt; but trouble is that most publishers have sacrificed departmental, fiction, and over-all reading quality for exterior appearances. So, better a bit o' modesty from now on if that's what happens when publishers begin getting hi-falutin' ideas.

Before pulling up the trap-door and going under-

ground again, here's a few parting shots more: drop 2 S-A BOOKS and put PS on a monthly schedule; or if you must continue your other title, restore it back to the caliber of its first three or four issues . . . the readers will thereafter advise you what selections to make.

Yerz Drooly,
Calvin Thomas Beck, LC

DEAD FISH, AND FOUL

39 Cameron St. S.
Kitchener, Ont.
Sept./4,000 B. C.

Greetings Ed,

Ah yes indeedie! Bradbury's little epic was very good but hardly sensational as you state on the cover. Actually you are insulting the readers intelligence by the use of such adjective. If you were trying to sell a comic book, then you would have need of such words as sensational, suspenseful, terrific and such crap as that, however PS is far from being a crummy comic book despite postulations to the contrary.

The RB tale was the best in the book natchrally, but only because the rest of the so called stories were under the usual standards of PS. Usually the stories you print have certain aspects of a long dead fish but this month they were all very foul. So foul indeed, that I refuse to comment on them which no doubt pleases you no end. Oh well in to the life of every editor must come a little sunshine. (No, I'm not finished yet.)

Ahhh that cover, la la la I like it, s'matter of fact I really like it. You know it seems that all the other prozines have decided that women belong in bedrooms and not on covers and if one wants to see a delectable Fem one must buy PS. Oh yes, indeedie the other mags still use females on the covers but they dress them up in—Guess what? Yah that's right bulky ole space suits—nast people.

Hmmm, seems to be some crumbums they don't like Freas and Vestal hmmm crazy mixed up kids. PS without Vestal is like Marilyn without Monroe. I don't know for sure but I'll bet you that the winners of originals have picked more Vestals than any others, and if Freas had been around longer he would no doubt be tied with Vestal, right? From this you can conclude that F and V are very good artists. No?

Wass matter that there isn't more VIZI. The screwballs are saying LA VIZI isn't as lively as it used to be. Natchrally it isn't, things can't get very lively with only three or four pages filled with inane glibberings like I write. Oh, for the good old days and a ten and fourteen page VIZIGRAPH (Hint).

You know, about five years ago everybody freely admitted that LA VIZI was the best letter column in the field but you won't find anyone saying that now because outside of one or two letters each ish it just simply stinks. In the old days we used to have some real humor and serious discussions but now LA VIZI is filled with nothing but the insignificant mouthings of stupid fen that write letters only to see their names in print.

Val Walker is a friend of mine but when he starts writing "Cheer Cheer Cheer, Yip Yip Yip" and it gets printed I start wondering about his mentality and yours, but you can be forgiven for all prozine editors are a little simple.

Best letters that get my vote are those of Joe Keogh, Carol McKinney and A. K. King. Joe and Carol get a vote because they always write an interesting and intelligent letter no matter what prozine

they write to, and King gets a vote for writing an interesting and serious letter.

"Of MICE and men and affectionate fen" oh well "who knows what puns lurk in the minds of fen?"

Yah, I think so too, so with your permission I depart.

Ugh-abooing Yours,
Frederick B. Christoff
The Ignorant One

SOUR APPLES

443 West Beaver
State College, Penna.

Dear Editor,

Re: THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN—

It stunk on ice! I always like Bradbury, but I had a sneaking suspicion that this was going to happen someday. Whether he couldn't think of a story—line, or was just trying to imitate Berry (ha) I don't know, but it's very evident that he thinks his admittedly good style is sufficient to cover the lack of a real story. In plain words, he sold you his name, and not much else. Take heed, innocent editor. Just because the Great White Father condescends to sell YOU a story, don't snap it right up before you see if it's actually worth printing. I bet you paid more than twice normal rates for that thing, too. Watch it Jack, you been took. Don't let it happen again.

The rest of the ish was about normal, except for BEYOND THE X ECLIPTIC, which I ate right up. Reminded me muchly of the old Save-the-World type of space opera that FBLong used to write.

Letters: Sullivan, King, and Butler in that order.

And now, I would like to add my name to the growing list of those advocating a bigger, better, rougher, tougher VIZI. Our slogan: Back to the old days! I remember in particular one argument about six or seven years back, on whether or not the speed of light could be exceeded. It lasted more than a year, many interesting ideas were brought out, and everybody had lots of fun. I wonder if it could be revived.

Also, how's chances for the return of those ugly full-page cartoons that you used to run?

That's about it for now, so long.

James Fenimore Cooper, Jr.

BRADBURY'S BOY

232 Santa Ana
Long Beach 3,
California

Dear Ed,

You poor, misguided ed, you. You printed my letter. Thanks. Hordes of undying gratitude be piled upon your editorial head. Gracias. Merci. And other words meaning thanx. It is my studied opinion that said letter was my most fannish (published, that is) to date.

On re-reading it, however, I find that I said one thing that is a little bit too strong. I corrected myself in the letter, but nonetheless I don't think anyone has the right to say to anyone else that the stories he picks stink. Forgiven?

Jack, from now on I buy PS regular-like. YOU PRINTED A RAY BRADBURY STORY! (More gratitude being sent your way from Long Beach. What in Hades you gonna do with all that gratitude-type stuff? Maybe you could remove Freas from the space he occupies and fill it up with gratitude. In other words, I don't like Kelly F. (Subtle, ain't I?) Anyway, back to the subject. Re: Bradbury. (ghod,

what a lousy pun. And SaMines already used it, too.)

I have said before, and I will say it again. Ray is my favorite author. Bar none. Fellow once tried to say that Bryan Berry was better than Ray when at his best. I shoved the words down his throat, with the following refrain floating from my pear-shaped head: NOBODY, repeat, NOBODY IS BLTTER THAN BRADBURY!!!

Naturally, THE GOLDEN APPLES is No. 1 on my list. Next would be SLAY-RIDE. (At this reading, I predict that exactly 1,675,420½ fen will jump down my throat, saying that SLAY-RIDE was lousy; it was hack material; it was an old plot; not even funny; IT STUNK (notice, I did not say that.)

(I merely predicted that other fen would say it). But I liked it. Fact is, I was surprised to read it. Just four months ago I wrote one along those very same lines. No. 3 is HIGHWAY J. Hoo, boy! Great story, just great. Time-travel always gets me.

As for letters, I would say yes. That is, there should be letters. I don't want you to increase the size of the VIZI. Just keep it the way it is, keep the discussions of a slightly fannish nature, and keep out the religious, philosophical, and political conversation. STARTLING STORIES has about 25 letters an ish, but about half of that is made up of the above type of letter. It ruins the letter column, makes it boring, and detracts from a fan's-eye view of the value of it.

Best letterists are (were?) Joe Keogh, Claude Hall, and Ron Ellik. I couldn't exactly vote myself first, but I'm sure as heck not going to keep myself out of it! Besides, I laughed at my own letter. One thing I'd like to know, Jack.

If a letterist wins the contest, does he pick an illo from the ish he talks about in his letter, the ish in which the letter is printed, or the ish in which you announce that he has won? Or any one of the three?

That's about it. Oh, yeah. Get Poul Anderson. The boy can really write space opera.

Sincerely,

Ron Ellik

Ed's Note: Consult your Sept. ish for answer to your pic-choice query. Look under Joe Keogh's missive.

STF THIRST

Dinamarca 50
México D.F.
República de México

Dear Editor:

It has been only recently that I started reading your magazine. I have enjoyed it so much that I really have become a fan. My craving for PLANET STORIES is so great that I am not satisfied with reading a copy once a month, and have been busy looking for old copies in book stores. Unfortunately I have only found a few of them. It seems that not very many people here in Mexico know about the existence of them, and I am sure that if publicity was made in this country, there would be an enormous demand for your magazine.

Take me for example, I had only to read but one copy, (a very old one given to my little brother by a friend), and when I finished reading it, I immediately went to an American book store and bought the last copy. Since then I buy it every month.

I bought November's PLANET yesterday and I finished reading it (including the ads). I think that THE PRISON OF THE STARS is one of the best stories you have ever printed. It is a very human story, with suspense and plot. It keeps you interested

from beginning to end which turns out to be very unexpected. Keep turning out more stories by Stanley Mullen.

I wonder if your readers who may come across my letter would like to trade their old copies for Mexican magazines. I will gladly start correspondence with any PLANET fan.

Sincerely yours,

Raúl Rojas Jaloma

Ed's Note: Just so you won't be hunting issues that do not exist, Raul, PLANET is published only six times each year.

VIZI—LESS

84 Wyke Road
Trowbridge
Wilts., England

Dear Ed,

It isn't often I send a letter to a pro-zine as I have enough to keep me busy, but the September ish of PLANET did it. One look at the contents page and I said to myself (quote). Well, I'll be damned. They've cut out the best feature in the mag. I'll be double-damned (unquote).

Then I turned over the page and there was the old VIZIGRAPH. Don't do that again, Ed, for I was nearly scared out of ten years of life.

I have written an article (which I hope is being published in a British zine shortly) in which I attack bitterly Editors who publish mags with no letter sections . . . and I was shocked temporarily to think that PLANET was now one. Shame on you, Ed.

I have not read any of the stories yet, but they look up to PLANET'S usual good standard (and that's no soft soap, either).

Regards to all fen, and if anyone wishes to drop me a line he or she is more than welcome.

Norman G. Dansborough

Ed's Note: A shortage of space was the only reason I failed to incorporate the VIZIGRAPH heading on the contents page, Norm.

BLOOD BROTHER

3 Bad. RAOC
Hill Barracks
Baor 34, Germany

Dear Editor,

I was very pleased recently to read a certain letter in your columns by Mr. A. K. King of Portsmouth, England. I heartily agree with most of what he had to say.

However, I must confess that I disagree with one or two items. Firstly, he states that the planet Venus has an atmosphere very similar in composition to our own. Yet, according to the latest treatise that I read, Venus' atmosphere is well nigh devoid of everything other than carbon dioxide. I find that no matter how much one haggles or speculates, oxygen is the absolutely necessary ingredient for the existence of living creatures.

Mr. King also imagines that it is quite possible that the distinctive reddish tinge of Mars might be some form of plant life. Personally, I prefer to think that the periodic appearance of green around the canals are much more likely to have life than the red. The latter, most likely, is vast areas of desert.

I am not trying to pull Mr. King's letter to pieces, but I think that a little constructive criticism would not be amiss. Incidentally, in case it is of any interest, the learned Mr. A. K. King is a blood relation of mine . . . brother, to be exact.

Now I wonder if anyone of your readers have theories on Retrograd satellites? I am aware that these celestial bodies revolve in the opposite direction to all the other bodies in our solar system. But who has any theories as to why?

In my present location it is just about impossible to get hold of copies of PLANET, except on civvy street where I manage to corral some six-month-old numbers. Any way, it is about the best stf mag going. Keep up the good work.

22717091 L/cpl. B. King

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 238) of Planet Stories published bi-monthly at Stamford, Connecticut for October 1, 1953.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc.,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

Editor, Jack O'Sullivan,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

Managing editor, Malcolm Reiss,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

Business manager, T. T. Scott,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given. Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc.,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

J. G. Scott,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and tri-weekly newspapers only.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 4th day of November, 1953.

[SEAL]

LOUISE H. HEKING, Notary Public.
My commission expires April 1, 1955

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+ - =

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+ =

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CITY _____ STATE _____

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Double **\$4.95**

NO FITTING REQUIRED!

A strong form-fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Snaps up in front. Adjustable back lacing and adjustable leg straps. Soft flat groin pad—no steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort, invisible under light clothing. Also used as after-operation support. Just measure around the lowest part of your abdomen and state right side, left side or double. Your Rupture Easer is ready to wear—just adjust back lacing and leg straps—and you face the world again with confidence and comfort. The immediate relief is almost unbelievable.

MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT DEvised

Soft gentle support aids Nature relieve this serious affliction in the most effective way. Brings wonderful new freedom from fear and worry. No binding, torturing steel or leather bands. Rupture-Easer has helped thousands of users—restored them to useful comfortable living—the same is YOURS FOR THE ORDERING!

INVISIBLE UNDER CLOTHING — Washable, Sanitary

Wear Rupture-Easer with new confidence under your lightest clothing. No more visible than any usual undergarment—no revealing bulk to hide. Fits under girdles and corsets. Washable—easy to keep fresh and sanitary.

BLESSED RELIEF DAY AND NIGHT

You can sleep in it work in it—bathe in it!
10 DAY TRIAL OFFER
Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief!

Piper Brace Co., Dept. FH-4
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.
Note: Be sure to give size and side.

**DELAY MAY
BE SERIOUS
ORDER TODAY**

What Folks Just Like You Write About RUPTURE-EASER

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: "Send me another Rupture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hrs. a day."

M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: "It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."

PIPER BRACE COMPANY

811 Wyandotte, Dept. FH-4 Kansas City 6, Mo.
Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side ☐ \$3.95 Measure around lowest part
Left Side ☐ \$3.95 of my abdomen is
Double ☐ \$4.95INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s

Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for \$.....
☐ Send C. O. D.

Name

Address

City and State

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